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HERMES CHRISTIANUS
The Intermingling of Hermetic Piety
and Christian Thought

by

Claudio Moreschini

Translated by Patrick Baker



BREPOLS

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Translator's Note	xi
Chapter 1. Philosophical Hermetic Literature	1
Chapter 2. Late Antique Christian Hermetism	27
Chapter 3. Between Latin West and Byzantine East	91
Chapter 4. The Rebirth of Greek Hermetism in Italy: Marsilio Ficino and Ludovico Lazzarelli	133
Chapter 5. Prolegomena to François Foix-Candale's Commentary on the <i>Pimander</i>	189
Chapter 6. Sixteenth-Century Representatives of Italian Hermetism	245
Chapter 7. Discovering the Hermetic Writings' True Identity: The Contribution of Isaac Casaubon	273
Select Bibliography	287
Indexes	301

PREFACE

‘To trace the development of Hermetism across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by way of rigorous textual interpretation, to follow its various resonances on every level, would be, without a doubt, to contribute a singularly important chapter to the history of the epoch.’ Thus wrote Eugenio Garin in 1961, when indicating the importance for the subject of an even earlier study by Paul Oskar Kristeller (published in 1938). In the wake of Garin’s exhortation to deepen and broaden our understanding of Hermetism, it became the object of numerous studies, many of them excellent, that need not be listed here. Yet over time, the field of study has grown increasingly wider. Non-philosophical aspects (in the traditional sense) linked to the name of Trismegistus, such as astrology, alchemy, and the so-called ‘pseudo sciences’, steadily gained in importance. Within so-called ‘philosophical’ Hermetism, on the other hand, as the contours of a Hebrew or an Arabic Hermetism became ever more clearly defined, it was realized that familiarity with Greek and Latin texts did not suffice. Obviously, the *comprehensive* realization of the enterprise urged by Garin has grown increasingly more difficult.

Aware of having to limit the scope of my own study, I have thus decided to focus on the way Christian philosophers and theologians appropriated and then elaborated Hermetic theosophy, not Hermetic science. When speaking of ‘Hermes Christianus’ one naturally thinks of a non-Christian Hermes, the primordial figure in the history of Egypt who achieved renown beginning in the Hellenistic Age of Graeco-Roman antiquity. Numerous written sources testified to him, and equally numerous works were attributed to him from the second to the sixth centuries AD. But with the Christianization of the late antique world, this distinction between Christian and non-Christian Hermetism naturally began to dissolve. Hence it is possible to write a comprehensive study of the place of Hermetism in Christian

writers of Late Antiquity; this becomes much more difficult for the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. I am aware, then, of not having been able to ‘follow its various resonances *on every level*’, as Garin had hoped. Therefore *Hermes Christianus* is not an impossible ‘history’ of Hermetism (such a history would have required the same dimensions as Thorndike’s study of magical and experimental science), but an attempt to enlarge our knowledge of Hermetic religious philosophy. I am quite aware that many relevant individuals have, for now, slipped through the ‘net’ of my study, and thus that its argument can at times be impressionistic. Nonetheless I am convinced that the present volume serves a useful function; readers may judge for themselves.

I began my study of Hermetism almost thirty years ago (in 1985) with the publication of *Dall’‘Asclepius’ al ‘Crater Hermetis’: Studi sull’ermetismo latino tardo-antico e rinascimentale* (Pisa: Giardini), a volume that was well received. The title alone indicates my interests, and they have remained constant down to the present volume. I later returned to the subject in my *Storia dell’ermetismo cristiano*, published by Morcelliana (Brescia) in 2000. Unfortunately this book was given only limited diffusion by the publisher; meanwhile I continued to make contributions to the study of Hermetism, as did many others, and so it seemed wise to re-examine my previous studies and bring them up to date. Thus the present *Hermes Christianus* takes up certain problems I have treated over the course of nearly three decades and re-elaborates them, sometimes radically.

The two books mentioned above have been supplemented by the following journal articles, here listed not chronologically but according to the order of the chapters of the present volume. For Chapter 1: ‘Soteria ermetica e soteria cristiana: affinità generiche e punti di contatto’, in *Pagani e cristiani alla ricerca della salvezza (secoli I–III): XXXIV Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana Roma, 5–7 maggio 2005*, *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum*, 96 (Rome: Augustinianum, 2006), pp. 261–74. For Chapter 4: ‘L’ermetismo del Rinascimento da Marsilio Ficino a Ludovico Lazzarelli’, *Aries*, 5 (2005), 33–60; ‘Ancora alcune considerazioni su Marsilio Ficino e l’ermetismo’, in *Marsilio Ficino: Fonti, Testi, Fortuna, Atti del Convegno internazionale (Firenze, 1–3 ottobre 1999)*, ed. by S. Gentile and S. Toussaint (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2006), pp. 89–120; ‘La poesia cristiana di Ludovico Lazzarelli: I *Fasti Christianae Religionis*’, *Accademia*, 5 (2003), 39–59. For Chapter 5: ‘Il commento al *Corpus Hermeticum* di François Foix-Candale: Annotazioni storiche e filologiche’, *Aries*, 9 (2009), 37–58; ‘Il commento al *Pimandro* di François Foix-Candale: prime considerazioni’, in *Anthropine Sophia: Studi di filologia e storiografia filosofica in memoria di Gabriele Giannantoni*, ed. by F. Alesse and others (Naples: Bibliopolis, 2008), pp. 551–60.

Finally, for Chapter 7: ‘Alla scoperta della vera identità degli scritti ermetici: il contributo di Isaac Casaubon’, in *Verités(s) philologiques(s): études sur les notions de vérité et de fausseté en matière de philologie*, ed. by P. Hummel and Fr. Gabriel (Paris: Philologicum, 2008), pp. 207–19.

I would like to thank all of the publishers for giving me permission to reuse portions of previously published material, and especially my friends and colleagues Robert Dodaro, Sebastiano Gentile, Stéphane Toussaint, Wouter Hanegraaff, Francesca Alesse, and Pascale Hummel.

Special thanks go to James Hankins and Brian Copenhaver for having looked kindly on my proposal to publish the present volume, and for having found a place for it with the prestigious publisher Brepols. Thanks also to the copyeditor, Deborah A. Oosterhouse.

Patrick Baker, of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, translated my Italian text into English. His was not a simple translation, though, but rather a true scholarly collaboration. Dr Baker discussed word choice with me with regard not only to proper English usage, but also to philosophical meaning. Furthermore, he helped me to identify oversights in the text and to correct them. To him and his philological precision I owe particular gratitude.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

For translations of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and *Asclepius* I have relied heavily on the English version of Brian Copenhaver (*Hermetica*, Cambridge University Press, 1992). Both direct quotations and paraphrases are based on his edition. It was often necessary to alter his rendering slightly in order to bring out the nuance desired by Professor Moreschini; such cases are too numerous to be noted with full consistency. Suffice it to say that all English translations of the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* and Latin *Asclepius* are basically Copenhaver's, and that they are often slightly modified (although rarely with any significant difference in meaning).

All other Latin and Italian primary sources I have translated myself, in consultation with Prof. Moreschini, except where noted. Bibliographical information about the primary sources used and about translations other than mine can be found in the Primary Sources section of the Select Bibliography. Translations of Greek primary sources were taken from existing editions, where possible, or based on Prof. Moreschini's own Italian renderings (and again, in consultation with him), where not. Translations of the Coptic texts of the Nag-Hammadi collection are from *The Nag-Hammadi Library*, as noted.

Two words must be said with regard to Chapter 5, which is largely a paraphrase of Foix-Candale's Middle French commentary on the *Corpus Hermeticum*. First, it contains a great deal of specialized terminology which, having been translated into English by way of Prof. Moreschini's Italian (and not Candale's archaic French), can only be considered approximate; readers should bear in mind that they find themselves two steps removed from the original. Second, Candale is often long-winded and convoluted, and it has been impossible to avoid these shortcomings entirely in an English paraphrase while still respecting the primary imperative of fidelity to the text.

Finally, a note of explanation regarding the use of the word 'demon' as a translation for *daemon*. Although it is common in translations of classical, pre-Christian texts to leave this term untranslated (e.g. Socrates' *daemon*), and although this usage has grown increasingly common for writings of the Christian or Common Era as well, it has seemed best to use the word 'demon' throughout, and for two reasons: (1) it respects this book's specific focus on Christian thought; and, similarly, (2) it highlights connections, similarities, and dissimilarities — or at least keeps such from being obscured — between the various works discussed over a period of about fifteen hundred years. For example, to have Augustine talk about 'demons' but Ficino *daemones* would make it seem as if their texts had different beings in mind, when in fact such is rather improbable.

In closing, I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Brian Copenhaver, who readily and generously lent his assistance on a few particularly troublesome issues, and above all to Prof. Moreschini for his patient consideration and explanation of countless points of uncertainty.

P.B., Berlin

PHILOSOPHICAL HERMETIC LITERATURE

Among the numerous writings of a religious nature from the second and third centuries AD,¹ there are certain treatises that once enjoyed great fame and that even now pique our interest for many reasons. In them are found the teaching of the Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus.² They were assembled into a

¹ This commonly accepted dating is valid for the final redaction of the Hermetic corpus: since the various treatises are of a composite nature, they could date back even further; for example, Plutarch (*De Iside et Osiride* 61. 375F) mentions a book of Hermes on the sacred names of Egypt (see J.-P. Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, vol. I: *Les Textes hermétiques de Nag Hammadi et leurs parallèles grecs et latins*; vol. II: *Le Fragment du 'Discours parfait' et les 'Définitions' hermétiques arméniennes* (NH VI, 8.8a) (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1978–82), II, 25–26). Further ancient testimonies on Hermetism are provided by Diodorus Siculus (first century BC–first century AD), as we shall see in Chapter 6, pp. 265–66, and Strabo, *Geographica* XVII. 1. 46.

² For a general study of philosophical Hermetic literature, see *Hermetica: The Greek 'Corpus Hermeticum' and the Latin 'Asclepius' in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction*, trans. by B. Copenhaver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993; repr. 2008). As for interpretive studies of the Hermetic texts predating the rediscovery of their Egyptian cultural provenance, only those works that have remained indispensable will be cited: R. Reitzenstein, *Poimandres: Studien zur griechisch-ägyptischen und frühchristlichen Literatur* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1904); W. Kroll, 'Hermes Trismegistos', in *Real Encyclopädie*, ed. by A. Pauly and G. Wissowa, vol. VIII. 1 (Stuttgart: Metzlersche, 1912), cols 792–823; *Hermetica: The Ancient Greek and Latin Writings which Contain Religious or Philosophic Teachings ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus*, ed. with English trans. and notes by W. Scott, vols I–IV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924–36) (the fourth volume was ed. by A. S. Ferguson); *Corpus Hermeticum*, vols I–IV, ed. by A. D. Nock and trans. by A.-J. Festugière (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1945–54) [hereafter Nock-Festugière]; A.-J. Festugière, *La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste*, vols I–IV (Paris: Gabalda, 1950–54). Further bibliography in *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. and commented upon by A. D. Nock and A.-J. Festugière, edition of the Coptic texts and commentary by Ilaria Ramelli, Greek, Latin, and Coptic text (Milan: Bompiani, 2005), pp. 1549–1619.

formal corpus of fourteen treatises in Byzantine times, which, when translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino in 1463, bore the title *Poimandres* (*Poimander*, *Poemander*). Three more treatises were added in the sixteenth century, but the title of the collection remained *Poimandres* down to G. Parthey's edition (1854). In modern editions the seventeen treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are numbered I–XIV and XVI–XVIII. This numbering results from Adrianus Turnebus's insertion, in his 1554 edition, of an additional treatise after number XIV, to which he gave the number XV. It was composed of three texts: three taken from Stobaeus's *Anthologium* and one from the lexicon known as the *Suda*.³ Modern scholars have not accepted this procedure and have restored the corpus to its earlier form of seventeen treatises, maintaining, however, for the sake of clarity, the numeration that had prevailed for three centuries. Thanks to the renaissance knowledge of Stobaeus's *Anthologium* (and thus beginning in the sixteenth century), fragments of other treatises not found in the *Corpus Hermeticum* were discovered, and they were equally attributed to the teaching of Trismegistus. There are about thirty such texts of varying lengths (the most important has a specific title: *Kore Kosmou*). In addition to these works in Greek, a Latin treatise was written in the fourth century AD, entitled *Asclepius* and attributed, incorrectly, to Apuleius. It is the translation of a Greek Hermetic treatise called *Logos teleios*, 'perfect discourse'. Finally, the philosophical and religious doctrines attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were quoted rather frequently in the Imperial Age, especially by Latin Christian writers. The most important were Tertullian, Lactantius, and Augustine.

The collection of the seventeen Greek treatises that constitute the *Corpus Hermeticum* was probably the result of a selection, in the sense that the compiler omitted other Hermetic writings which had a more obvious pagan significance (the fragments preserved by Stobaeus are of this kind, such as the *Kore Kosmou*), including instead those treatises that are very close to Christian doctrines (indeed, this was the reason for their popularity in the European Renaissance). The first witness to the existence of the *Corpus Hermeticum* would seem to be Michael Psellos, in the eleventh century. Psellos wrote an annotation on the eighteenth chapter of the first treatise in which he condemned magic and emphasized the antiquity of the Christian message.⁴ The treatises of the *Corpus* do not contain magic elements, either; perhaps the *Corpus* was assembled not only by selecting the texts closest to Christianity, but also by excluding the magic and occultism condemned by Psellos. No

³ See below, p. 190.

⁴ See pp. 128–29.

trace of the collection can be found before the eleventh century, although certain treatises could have been utilized even earlier. Stobaeus, for example, reproduces excerpts from treatises II, IV, and IX; Cyril of Alexandria, in the fifth century, knew XI and XIV and quotes them in his *Contra Iulianum* I. 22 and II. 42.

The recent discoveries of Coptic texts, in Nag Hammadi (1946), and of Armenian ones as well have made other Hermetic writings known.⁵ These are related to certain of the texts mentioned above (especially the *Logos teleios* and the *Asclepius*), which form the basis of the long tradition of Christian exegesis. Their titles are *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* (NH VI. 6. 52. 1–63. 32); *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NH VI. 7. 63. 33–65. 7); *Asclepius* 21–29 (NH VI. 8. 65. 15–78. 43).⁶

Cyril, bishop of Alexandria in the fifth century, was interested in Hermetic doctrines — as all Christian intellectuals had been since the third century — and he knew other works that have not come down to us. One, written in Athens, was divided into fifteen books and bore the title *Treatises of Hermes* (he mentions them in *Contra Iul.* I. 41). Another, in more than one book, was entitled *Detailed Discourses (of Hermes) to Tat* (*Contra Iul.* I. 46, 49). And another, in at least three books, was called *Discourses to Asclepius* (*Contra Iul.* I. 48, 49). The relationship between the various forms of these treatises is explained by Mahé in two ways.⁷ First he wonders if the word *exodica*, found in the Coptic translation of the treatise *On the Eighth and Ninth* (p. 63.1–3), is similar to *exotica* in *Asclepius* (chap. 1), where it is said that Trismegistus had written many texts dedicated to Ammon and very many others to his beloved son Tat — these texts are *physica exoticaque* (thus the manuscripts).⁸ Thomas wrote *exoticaque* and approved a correction of Reitzenstein, *diexodicaque*, in his edition of Apuleius;⁹ Mahé therefore corrected *exodica* to <Di>*exodica*, and for this reason *exodica* might be compared to the *diexodika*

⁵ A list and an explanation of the contents of these texts are in J.-P. Mahé, 'La Voie d'immortalité à la lumière des *Hermetica* de Nag Hammadi et de découvertes plus récentes', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 45 (1991), 347–75 (pp. 347–48).

⁶ Titles quoted according to *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, trans. and intro. by members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, Claremont, California, General Editor James M. Robinson, 4th rev. edn with an afterword by R. Smith, Managing Editor (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁷ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, I, 132.

⁸ The *Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth* speaks of *Leçons Générales* and *exodica* texts.

⁹ P. Thomas, *Apulei Platonici Madaurensis 'De philosophia libri'* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1908); and thus I did, too, in *Apulei Platonici Madaurensis, De philosophia libri*, ed. by Moreschini (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1991), p. 40. 6.

treatises mentioned in Cyril, *Contra Iulianum* 1. 46 (frag. 30 Nock-Festugière). Later he observes that instruction in Hermetism begins with the *genikoi logoi*, or *General Discourses* (or *Lessons*), after which it progresses to a higher stage, that of the *Detailed Discourses*.¹⁰ As can be seen in the passage of *The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*, the master explains to the disciple that whoever has not been generated in god will have to be satisfied with the *General Lessons* (*genikoi logoi*) and *Detailed Lessons* (*diexodikoi logoi*), whose function is to purify the soul; only afterwards can the knowledge of higher reality be reached.¹¹

It is noteworthy that the diffusion of Hermetic doctrines in the Latin part of the Roman Empire came about largely thanks to the interest Christian writers had for this theosophy. From Tertullian to Lactantius to Augustine, quotations of and allusions to Hermes' teaching abound, and these permitted the continued knowledge (and thus original reworking) of Hermetic doctrines in the Middle Ages. The *Asclepius*, too — that is, the Latin translation of the *Logos teleios* — was also considered one of the most important Hermetic treatises, and its historical significance has been massive. For its Latin form allowed it to be read in the Middle Ages and, from the twelfth century on, to achieve remarkable renown. Before the discovery and the Latin translation of the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius* was the only complete Hermetic text accessible to Western readers.

A.-J. Festugière, one of the most important scholars of ancient Hermetism, divided Hermetic writings into two categories, popular and learned, although he admits that 'these two groups are not without overlap. Thus there are traces of astrology in learned Hermetism, traces of alchemy in the *Kore Kosmou*. Moreover, two writings of the alchemist Zosimus are clearly influenced by the Gnostic and mystical speculations of learned Hermetism'. But he adds: 'nevertheless, the distinction between the two groups of writings remains clear. The only point in common is that all are presented as revealed writings — revealed, for that matter, by Hermes Trismegistus'.¹² And, as we shall see, the Christian reinterpretation of Hermes Trismegistus was effected largely on the basis of those writings that are considered 'philosophical'.

¹⁰ Mahé, 'La Voie d'immortalité', pp. 357–58.

¹¹ Information on this distinction between *genikoi* and *diexodikoi logoi* can also be found in G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 97–99.

¹² A.-J. Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1967), p. 30.

The Origin of the Hermetic Texts

The texts in question are set in Egypt. Hence also their popularity on the broader plane of Egyptomania, which began to take hold of Europe in the sixteenth century. The texts always feature the same characters: Hermes, Agathodaemon, Asclepius, Ammon, and Tat. The three Hermetic writings of Nag Hammadi's codex VI have a flavour and a mythological content that are quite markedly Egyptian, and the *Asclepius* exalts the ancient civilization and religion of Egypt. Non-Egyptian and non-Greek elements are scarce. There are elements of a religion that can approximate Judaism, probably due, as Dodd observes, to the fact that the Hermetic writer was situated on the border of pagan culture and was interested in the cultural forms of Judaism.¹³ On the other hand, almost nothing Roman is found, given that Egypt, like the entire Greek East, was very little influenced by Roman rule, which it considered foreign to itself. A hostile attitude to Greek culture crops up only in isolated patches of the sixteenth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

The Egyptian origin of the Hermetic texts was accepted without any hesitation by all ancient readers. This continued down to the Renaissance and beyond, when doubt was cast upon it by Isaac Casaubon (as we shall see at pp. 273–85). The belief in Hermetism's Egyptian origin continued through the nineteenth century, although with no secure philological basis. A rigorous demonstration of this hypothesis was then provided by Richard Reitzenstein, the great (albeit not very systematic) scholar of the history of religions, whose study, in terms of historical and philosophical scope, has parallels only in the work of sixteenth-century philosophers.¹⁴ But he later abandoned his own interpretation, going on to hypothesize instead (as he did, one might say, in all of his later writings) an Iranian origin.¹⁵

¹³ Still fundamental on this topic is the essay of C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935); see also, more recently, M. Philonenko, 'Le Poimandrès et la liturgie juive', in *Les Synchrétismes dans les religions de l'Antiquité*, ed. by F. Dunand and P. Levêque (Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 204–11; Philonenko, 'Une utilisation du Schema dans le Poimandrès', *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, 59 (1979), 369–72; B. A. Pearson, 'Jewish Elements in *Corpus Hermeticum* I (Poimandres)', in *Essays on Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions*, ed. by R. van den Broek and M. J. Vermaseren (Leiden: Brill, 1981), pp. 336–48; A. Camplani, 'Riferimenti biblici nella letteratura ermetica', *Annali di storia dell'esegesi*, 10 (1993), 375–425, with further bibliography. Substantially, however, the Jewish elements in which the Hermetic writers were ostensibly interested are found above all in the first treatise of the *Corpus* (the *Poimandres*) and in the thirteenth.

¹⁴ Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*.

¹⁵ R. Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen nach ihren Grundgedanken und Wirkungen* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927); Reitzenstein, *Studien zum antiken Synkretismus* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1926).

Thereafter, down to about 1980, the reigning interpretive paradigm was that fashioned by A.-J. Festugière's monumental survey, as well as by his numerous shorter contributions.¹⁶ According to this interpretation, the Hermetic writings contain very few Egyptian elements — essentially only the names of the characters of the dialogues. The philosophical and religious doctrines, on the contrary, were supposedly those of popular Greek philosophy: a mix of Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism that was widely diffused in Late Antiquity. Traces of Judaism and probably also of a religious literature of Iranian origin could be found, but there were no elements of Christianity or Neoplatonism. Egypt, therefore, was a literary artifice pure and simple, and one employed without any doctrinal coherence. No new religion was preached in the Hermetic treatises.¹⁷ Consequently, there was no Hermetic 'doctrine' in the modern sense. What was attributed to Hermes could have been attributed equally well to Ostanès or to Zoroaster. 'It would suffice to change the names of the sages: priests of Egypt, magicians of Chaldea or Persia, gymnosophists of India'; 'the name of Hermes covered a movement that is found everywhere in the same form, under the patronage of other prophets'.¹⁸

Around 1975, J.-P. Mahé began his studies of Hermetic treatises written in Coptic and Armenian. In so doing, he opened the path to further research, and he arrived at an important conclusion: the Coptic translation of the Greek treatise entitled *Logos teleios*, preserved among the writings of Nag Hammadi (VI. 8), and its teaching on the soul's ascent and judgement after death were based on a background that is no less Egyptian than Hellenistic. The Hermetic text in Armenian, entitled *Definitions* (a collection of sentences), was, according to Mahé, the model for what he believed was the fundamental form of a Hermetic discourse. The Hermetic sentences derived from similar ones found in ancient Egyptian wisdom literature, particularly of the kind called 'instructions', which dates back to the Old Kingdom. They were then diffused in Hellenistic literature in the form of the *gnome* ('sentence'), which was a typical Greek literary genre. In this way, two seemingly contradictory characteristics of the Hermetic treatises are explained: the lack of doctrinal unity, and uniform phraseology. In fact, the treatises, in Mahé's view, were composed of sentences of Egyptian origin accompanied by a commentary. On this basis, Mahé reposes the question of Hermetism's origin and profoundly investigates the relationship between the Greek and Egyptian worlds.

¹⁶ Festugière, *La Révélation*; Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*.

¹⁷ Festugière, *La Révélation*, I, 84–87; Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, pp. 38–40.

¹⁸ Festugière, *La Révélation*, I, 27 and 79, 355.

Shortly thereafter, E. Iversen published an important study tracing nearly all Hermetic concepts back to the literature of ancient Egypt.¹⁹ His work is too simplistic and is based on similarities and parallels that require greater evidence, but it nonetheless merits greater attention than it has hitherto received.

An extensive and balanced work demonstrating Hermetism's Egyptian origin is that of G. Fowden.²⁰ He recognizes the value of Mahé's research and arguments, but he believes (and rightly so) that Mahé has exaggerated the importance of the sentences' literary form. Greek Hermetic texts embody a syncretic culture whose elements are not easily separated. Hermetism united interest for Hellenism with a profound and explicit knowledge of its own Egyptian roots. Its doctrine stems from the heart of the Egyptian mentality; it is not a Greek philosophy to which a coat of varnish has been applied.

Thanks to these studies, it is now a *communis opinio* that the theosophy of Hermes Trismegistus, in its various forms (philosophy, alchemy, astrology, magic), effectively arose in an Egyptian setting and is the Hellenistic transformation of a very ancient cultural and religious heritage. 'How this contact [scil. between Greece and Egypt] was established, we do not know,' Iversen observes, 'but it can hardly have been based on the original Egyptian texts which would have been inaccessible to foreigners, but probably on oral communications or literary expounding.'²¹ Nevertheless, Iversen believes there is no reason to deny credence to the statements of all Greek writers regarding Hermetism's Egyptian origin.²² Fowden, then, seeks to explain precisely what had been omitted by Iversen, namely the manner in which Hermetism developed in the Graeco-Egyptian milieu of the Hellenistic Age.

In our view, although the demonstration of Hermetic theosophy's Egyptian origin is an undeniable advance, it still does not erase past gains, which place it in the same context as other forms of thought of the age. Doctrines corresponding to those of the ancient Egyptian traditions were in circulation in late antique philosophy. Therefore, even if the theosophy of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is of Egyptian origin, it is not an isolated phenomenon but rather an aspect of the broader diffusion of Egyptian culture and its influence on the Greek world.

¹⁹ E. Iversen, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 1984).

²⁰ Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*.

²¹ Iversen, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, p. 53.

²² Iversen, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, p. 54.

Hermetism spread in the cultural milieu of the middling social classes of the Hellenistic Age, which were characterized by a willingness to accept ideas of non-Greek origin (in this case Egyptian, but in others Iranian and Judaic).²³ These they at times expressed in formulas derived from the better-known philosophies (especially Platonism and Stoicism), but popularized and simplified due to their inability to synthesize disparate cultural elements in a rational and systematic manner. In other words, Hermetism is a form of religiosity typical of the great masses of persons at the middle level of culture who were of various stock and of a precarious social condition and who inhabited the metropolises of the Hellenistic and Roman East.²⁴ Hermetism spread, as did similar theosophies, in those social strata of the Hellenistic monarchies that spoke Greek instead of the local languages, but that did not participate in high culture and that were open to 'Oriental', or at least non-Greek, influences.²⁵ The religiosity, the mysticism, the 'piety' that constituted Hermetism's deepest essence fall squarely within the cultural characteristics of Late Antiquity and the 'age of anxiety' described by E. R. Dodds.

In addition to the religious philosophy we are now investigating, this milieu is also home to the so-called 'occult sciences' and astrology, which are equally a mark of Hermetism. Scholars generally agree that the distinction between philosophy, on the one hand, and alchemy, magic, and astrology, on the other, is not tenable, since at best it applies only to certain texts.²⁶ Indeed, although Nock and Festugière considered Stobaeus's excerpts to be 'philosophical', some of them contain 'technical' material. Excerpt VI, for example, deals with astrology and the decans and demons of the stars. This 'technical' knowledge is not merely of an elementary nature but is a prelude to gnosis. Excerpts XXIV–XXVI form a homogeneous group and describe the soul's function in light of its astral origins and the differences that exist between incarnate souls due to their constitution and their elements. In the

²³ As is known, the Judaism of the Hellenistic Age succeeded in uniting the two civilizations in a particularly interesting osmosis.

²⁴ Interesting observations have been made on this topic by H. Dörrie, in his review of A.-J. Festugière, *Révélation*, *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeige*, 209 (1955), 230–42; repr. in *Platonica Minora* (Munich: Finck, 1976), pp. 100–11.

²⁵ Fundamental for this picture of Hellenistic society, open to 'Oriental' religious influences, is Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, pp. 70–72.

²⁶ This is also the position of Eugenio Garin concerning Hermetism in the Renaissance. G. Filoramo, 'Fascino dell'ermetismo', in Filoramo, *Figure del sacro* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1993), pp. 93–107 (p. 101); Ermete Trismegisto, *La pupilla del mondo*, ed. by Chiara Poltronieri, with an introduction by Giovanni Filoramo (Venice: Marsilio, 1994), pp. 16–17, also observes that the two types of treatises, alchemical and philosophical, are united by a common vision of the universe.

Kore Kosmou the union of philosophy and magic is strong. Thus it cannot be ruled out that the practical knowledge of medicine, magic, and alchemy is connected to the search for salvation that comes from gnosis, that is, the knowledge of God. Magic also resembles philosophy in certain passages of the *Asclepius* (chaps 23–24, 37–38) that discuss the ‘construction of gods’. The mixture of aims and methods is also apparent in the text of Nag Hammadi’s VI. 6. The treatise is a clear example of what Fowden calls a Hermetic initiation text.²⁷ It describes the final phase of a philosophical *paideia*, the last steps that an initiate must take in order to know his true nature and achieve happiness by reaching God. This aim is also announced in *Corpus Hermeticum* I and XIII, and the majority of the other treatises of the *Corpus* are preparatory to reaching salvation. That is, they describe various lower steps of progress towards wisdom through which the initiate must pass in order to achieve the rebirth of his own earthly condition. Mahé concludes that

there is no reason to attribute the alchemical and magical recipes contained in those writings to the masses. On the contrary, they derive from what was then considered a science, just as much as it was considered philosophy. The one is not to be separated from the other, and it would be absurd to think that the learned readers of Hermes’ *Alchemica* did not also know the *Philosophica*.²⁸

Nor is astrology to be understood as ‘popular Hermetism’. Consequently there is a tendency in modern scholarship to see the original nature of Hermetism in the non-philosophical *Hermetica*. Moreover, today the presence of alchemical, magical, and astrological elements tends to be seen in the philosophical *Hermetica* as well. It seems to us, however, that B. Copenhaver is right when he observes that, if this interpretation were fully correct — namely that the technical and philosophical books are correlated aspects of the same conception of the world — then one would expect to find theory alongside practice in Hermetic books on alchemy and astrology, but that the same does not happen in the ‘philosophical’ books, although they do contain theoretical frameworks in the form of observations on astrology, demonology, and similar topics.²⁹ Actually, these distinctions belong to a modern conception.

²⁷ Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 97–99.

²⁸ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 22; on the same topic, see Mahé, ‘Théorie et pratique dans l’*Asclepius*’, in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism – La tradizione ermetica dal mondo tardo-antico all’umanesimo: Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Napoli, 20–24 novembre 2001*, ed. by P. Lucentini, I. Parri, and V. Perrone Compagni (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), pp. 5–23 (p. 21); Gonzalez Blanco, ‘Hermetism: A Bibliographical Approach’, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. by I. Temporini and W. Haase, II. 17. 4: *Principat, Religion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984), pp. 2240–81 (p. 2242 n. 3).

²⁹ *Hermetica*, trans. by Copenhaver, pp. xxxii–xl, especially pp. xxxvi and xxxvii.

Hermetic Theosophy

As has been said, Hermetic literature is evidence of Graeco-Egyptian syncretism, analogous to that found in the hymns celebrating the virtue of Isis and Asclepius, such as the anonymous one contained in *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus* 1380 (first half of the second century), or in the works of Maneton and Cheremon. According to Filoramo, Hermetic theosophy is 'a form of revealed knowledge' that lies 'between the Greek rationalist tradition and Eastern wisdom'.³⁰ The Hermetist considers the doctrine he is taught to be a 'revelation' (hence the title of Festugière's chief work), as the sermonizing tone of certain parts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* attests:

And I began proclaiming to mankind the beauty of reverence and knowledge: 'People, earthborn men, you who have surrendered yourselves to drunkenness and sleep and ignorance of god, make yourselves sober and end your drunken sickness, for you are bewitched in unreasoning sleep.' When they heard, they gathered round with one accord. And I said: 'Why have you surrendered yourselves to death, earthborn men?' (*CH* I. 27–28)

Tat, my child, never deprive the craftworks of their craftsman. (v. 8)

Where are you heading in your drunkenness, you people? Have you swallowed the doctrine of ignorance undiluted, vomiting it up already because you cannot hold it? Stop and sober yourselves up! (vii. 1)

The excitement of receiving a revelation is transmitted in the final prayer of the *Asclepius* (chap. 41). The principal aim of the revelation is to give salvation to man; it is God himself who procures it (*CH* IX. 5; *Ascl.* 41) through his feelings of compassion and love (*CH* VI. 4).³¹

Did a Hermetic doctrine exist, then, comparable to that of Stoicism or Platonism? As has been said, Festugière thinks so, although, as Mahé objects, he was not able to trace the lines of a Hermetic system.³² This is because the Hermetic texts are marked by a constant feature that makes it difficult to reconstruct a coherent doctrine in the way we think of such today: as Festugière has observed, they have nothing in the way of what we would call a system, that is, a set of organically constructed propositions deduced from an identifiable number of principles.³³ Indeed, Festugière, convinced that Hermetism was one of the many philosophies of Hellenistic and Roman times, thinks that the intention of the treatises is to use

³⁰ Filoramo's introduction to Ermete Trismegisto, *La pupilla del mondo*, p. 15.

³¹ See below, pp. 16–26.

³² Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 28–29.

³³ Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, p. 35.

a problem debated in schools to initiate discussion. Nevertheless, he adds that 'Hermetic schools were not philosophical schools in possession of a system, but schools of piety, i.e. of devotion, that took a random scholastic problem for their point of departure and, without lingering on the discussion of the problem in itself, sought the first available pretext for digressing into the realm of the homily and spiritual direction'.³⁴ Another example of structural disorder is provided by the fact that from one treatise to another, and sometimes within the same treatise, Hermes professes the most contradictory opinions on all the topics he treats. The Hermetic texts are also characterized by repetition: the same words, the same groups of phrases, the same formulas reappear endlessly, monotonously, from one treatise to the next. Another trait of Hermetic literature, finally, is that internal references among the various treatises are quite rare.

But even if one cannot speak of systematization or homogeneity,³⁵ a few constant threads do run through the Hermetic texts. In line with the parameters of the present study, let us consider those that conform most with Christian revelation, and thus that caused Christian writers to consider them a portent of it.³⁶

God and Matter

There is a clear separation between god and matter. This dualism is not different from the one characterizing Christian speculation starting in the second century AD, that is, the period when the Hermetic treatises were redacted.³⁷ As god is the

³⁴ Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, p. 37.

³⁵ See also what is said by Kroll, 'Hermes Trismegistos', cols 804–15, who especially provides the basis for our rapid reconstruction of Hermetic doctrine. His synthesis is admittedly very 'philosophical', and a recent one by Mahé, 'La Voie d'immortalité', is focused on other milieus (the Egyptian) and other texts (those of Nag Hammadi), but the *forma mentis* of Greek philosophy still remains the most useful way to approach the Christian interpretation of Hermetism.

³⁶ The search for Christian elements in Hermetism has been made by Jörg Büchli, *Der Poimandres: Ein paganisiertes Evangelium: sprachliche und begriffliche Untersuchungen zum 1. Traktat des Corpus Hermeticum* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987). He identified the elements in the *Poimandres* that are similar to Christianity, but he interpreted as proper influences what in our view are mere parallels. His conclusion is: 'Der Poimandres ist nicht eine vom Christentum unberührte Schrift, sondern zeigt im Gegenteil sehr weitgehende christliche Einflüsse' (p. 202). Without going into the details of a thorough critique, let it suffice to say that the similarities between the *Poimandres* and Christianity do not ipso facto entail an influence, nor an exclusive influence of Christianity on Hermetism. Büchli argues almost like a sixteenth-century Hermetist.

³⁷ This dualism is not metaphysical, however, as we shall have occasion to observe (p. 16).

origin of good, thus matter is the origin of evil (*Excerptum Stobaei* VII. 3); nothing is good on earth, nothing evil in heaven (*Exc. Stob.* XI). As light is found with God (I. 4. 21; II. 12; VII. 2), thus matter is darkness (I. 19; III. 1).

God's transcendence is absolute. He is *anousiastos* ('without essence') (*CH* II. 5) and *proon* ('prior to existence') (*Exc. Stob.* XXI. 1). All definitions must be eschewed when speaking about god, because they would limit him (*Ascl.* 20). He can be called 'the good alone' (*CH* II. 14; IV. 1; VI. 1) and 'immutably good' (*Exc. Stob.* XI. 2. 48), or cause and father of all things (II. 12. 17; V. 8).³⁸ He cannot even be called 'one', for he is not one but that from which one comes (V. 2); he is the monad (IV. 10); to use a concrete expression, he lives above the heavens (*Ascl.* 27). He is also *Nous* ('Mind') (*CH* I. 2; I. 9. 11–12).

Matter, on the other hand, is opposed to god as if it were a second principle (*Ascl.* 14). It receives its forms from god through the ideas and through Logos (*CH* I. 10–11; VIII. 3) and constitutes the substratum for becoming, that is, for the sensible world.³⁹

The World

Since god is absolutely transcendent, certain Hermetic writings conceive of the existence of a second god entrusted with the creation of the world. This second god is Logos (Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Iul.* I. 46 = frags 28–29 Nock-Festugière). The Logos that comes from the Father, being absolutely perfect and fertile and a creator, creates and gives life to all things; it is called 'son of god' (I. 46 = frag. 30).⁴⁰ It is also called Mind (I. 2. 6), which is light (I. 6) or fire (X. 16; XII. 18), a subtle and intelligent spirit (III. 1) that moves everything (I. 13; *Kore Kosmou* 14) and gives life to everything (*Ascl.* 6; Cyril, *Contra Iul.* I. 49 = frag. 24). It constitutes the *kosmos noetos*, that is, the world of the ideas in imitation of which the world is constructed, as Plato had earlier taught in the *Timaeus* (*Ascl.* 34). Another such succession is laid out in *CH* XI. 2: the demiurge creates Eternity, which is a hypostasis; Eternity creates the world, the world time, and time, in its turn, becoming (*Ascl.* 31–32).

³⁸ A more Gnostic term is 'forefather', which is found, not coincidentally, in the 'Egyptian' and more pagan *Kore Kosmou* (chap. 10).

³⁹ This is most likely a borrowing of the Middle Platonic doctrine of the relation between the creator-god and matter. After all, the treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are coeval with the greatest flourishing of Middle Platonism, having been composed, as was said, between the second and third centuries AD.

⁴⁰ See p. 86.

This distinction between the transcendent god and a god that is the creator of the universe is common to the theosophies of the age, like that of Numenius and the *Chaldean Oracles*, in addition, of course, to the theology of the Christian Logos — and for this precise reason it enjoyed great success in Christian Hermetism.

The world, too, can be considered the second god (*CH* VIII. 1–2; IX. 8; *Ascl.* 8). The relationship between god and the world is often described in a Stoic manner, as a kind of pantheism, especially in the *Asclepius* (see also *CH* V. 9: ‘for there is nothing in all the cosmos that he is not’; III. 4: ‘for the divine is the entire combination of cosmic influence renewed by nature, and nature has been established in the divine’; also IX. 9 and XI. 20). God is the vital force that pervades the whole world (*Ascl.* 6); he creates it and conserves it (*CH* II. 2; VIII. 2; IX. 8; XI. 17); in particular in IX. 9, the identity between the highest god and the creator of the world is demonstrated. His essence is an uninterrupted creating (XI. 5).

Since it was created by god, the sensible world is beautiful and good (*Ascl.* 25; *CH* VI. 2); it is a living being (XI. 5), created in the image of god and god’s very self (VIII. 2; XII. 15);⁴¹ it is therefore also called ‘son of god’ (IX. 8; X. 14; *Ascl.* 8). Since it is everything, the world is immortal (*CH* XI. 3; XII. 18). Below the supreme god are found other gods, such as the stars, which are living beings, and the heavens (*Ascl.* 3); other gods of a traditional character are probably local, like Jupiter Plutonius in Africa (*Ascl.* 19. 27). The sun has the first place among them (solar theology has a certain weight in Hermetism, as can be seen especially in *CH* XVI): compare *Asclepius* 29; *Excerptum Stobaei* XXI. 2: ‘the sun is the image of the creator-god, who is in the heavens; indeed, as he created all things, thus the sun creates living beings and generates plants and oversees spirits’; V. 3: ‘the sun, the greatest of the heavenly gods, to whom all the heavenly gods yield like a lord and sovereign’; X. 3; XVI. 5–18. The other gods are the planets, the seven governors who rule over the life of men (*Ascl.* 3 and 35) and produce the various movements (*CH* I. 11; III. 3; IX. 5: ‘the motion of the cosmos [...] produces generations of different kinds’; IX. 7: ‘the rapid motion of the cosmos produces diversity in causing generations of different kinds’). The stars’ rule over the world is destiny (*heimarmene*) (*Ascl.* 19. 39–40; *Exc. Stob.* VII. 3: ‘the governors encompass the sensible world in circles [...] the stars are the arm of destiny’); destiny rules over the whole of becoming (*CH* I. 15; *Exc. Stob.* XII. 5). Thus our bodies are subject to destiny, and each of the twelve constellations of the zodiac produces a specific passion in us (see *CH* I. 9: nature creates seven kinds of men, corresponding to the nature of the seven planets).

⁴¹ The Platonic doctrine of the *Timaeus* might also be present in this conception.

Hermetic cosmology is characterized by a doctrinal duplicity. Some texts consider the world to be good and beautiful, such that its contemplation is a way to reach god. This high opinion of the world is found in the *Asclepius* (chap. 8) and in *CH* V. 6–10 and XIII. 17–20. Praise for the order and the beauty of the visible world, defined as ‘the plenitude of life’, is found in XII. 15. This ‘optimistic’ tendency is counterposed by other writings that consider the world to be evil. They claim that the world is not a work of god, as god remains infinitely above matter. Therefore, god can only be reached by fleeing the world and feeling oneself foreign to it (*CHI*, IV, VI, VII, XIII).

Fowden thought he could resolve the duplicity and contradictoriness of the Hermetic doctrines by hypothesizing two levels of interpretation: the optimistic interpretation would belong to a first level of knowledge, whereas the distinction between the world and a transcendent divine reality would be the achievement of a second level of Hermetic ‘gnosis’.⁴² It would imply the self-knowledge of man’s own reality, in the sense that the individual would understand that there is a clear separation between the mind and the body. Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, however, prefers to maintain the distinction, proposed by Bousset,⁴³ of two distinct lines of thought, albeit lines that co-exist within a literary tradition lacking all systematization, the tradition placed under the name of Trismegistus. According to her, the so-called ‘optimistic’ tendency

puts the greatest emphasis on aspects of the material world, which is considered the essential component of the universe. Indeed, the universe itself is often identified with divinity itself, such that a pronounced monism comes to the fore [...]. Although regulated by the inflexible law of *heimarmene*, the planetary destiny under the power of the seven Governors, creation in large part retains the positive values expressed by the idea of *kosmos* according to the traditional canons of Greek thought.⁴⁴ [...] Consequently, since the world

⁴² Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 100–04.

⁴³ In his review of J. Kroll’s (fundamentally mistaken) *Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1914), in *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeige*, 1914, 697–755. Indeed, J. Kroll had exaggerated certain ideas that derived the nature of Hermetism from Greek philosophy, and he therefore saw the doctrines of the Stoics (especially Posidonius) and the Platonists everywhere in Hermetism.

⁴⁴ Filoramo, ‘Fascino dell’ermetismo’, p. 103, also emphasizes the reigning opposition between the two constituent elements of man and the world; he believes (p. 104), however, that Hermetism is not substantially animated by a dualism as radical as that which dominates in Gnosticism: ‘its pessimism is essentially psychological, that is it regards the origin and destiny of the soul and not the origin and destiny of the cosmos. Thus, Hermetic doctrine never proceeds to the blasphemous condemnation of the cosmos that is characteristic of the Gnostics.’ See also Ermete Trismegisto, *La pupilla del mondo*, pp. 19–20. The connection between Hermetism and Gnosticism is, to be sure, quite fleeting; it has been suggested anew, albeit somewhat rhapsodically, by G. Quispel, ‘Hermes Trismegistus and the Origins of Gnosticism’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 46 (1992), 1–19.

was only created in the image of predetermined archetypal forms, Hermetism does not arrive at the radical condemnation of it that characterizes the Gnostics. The dualism that opposes the divine, intellectual principle with matter emerges in Hermetism, especially regarding the composition of man. Indeed, the negative aspect of reality is found in the innermost structure of man.⁴⁵

Man

Man has a central place in the universe, between god and matter (*Ascl.* 7–8; *CH* I. 13–15). His body derives from the latter, whereas his soul, which constitutes his essence, his identity, has been given to him by god (I. 15; IV. 2; XII. 12). A more detailed gradation is provided by X. 13: *nous* (i.e. intuiting mind) is found in *logos* (reasoning mind), *logos* in the soul, the soul in the spirit, the spirit in the body. God created man so that the latter could contemplate his works, which are manifested in the world (*CH* I. 12; XIV. 7–8; *Ascl.* 8), and thus become lord of the world (X. 25). For this reason man can also be considered a third god, after the first god and the world (*Ascl.* 10).

Considering that man consists of an essential part, that is, that which is most specifically his own and is divine (*CH* I. 15; IX. 5; *Ascl.* 8. 31), and a material part, the same dualism exists within man that exists between god and matter. The body is therefore the instrument of ignorance, the basis of wickedness, the reason for which the struggle between the two parts of man comes about, the one tending to good, the other to evil (*CH* IV. 5; X. 15; *Exc. Stob.* II. B. 7).⁴⁶ This interior struggle is also typical of Christian anthropology.

Men derive their essential nature from god, but not all possess it in its purity, since not all possess mind. Indeed, mind (*nous*) is distinguished from *logos* insofar as it constitutes the faculty of intuitively knowing god, whereas *logos* is the reasoning and rational faculty (*Ascl.* 7 and 9; *CH* IV. 3; XII. 1. 4). These elect few know god and are separate from the masses (IX. 4). Other men are material (IX. 5) and are unable to contemplate god (*Exc. Stob.* VII. 3); they only possess *logos* and do not know what the true purpose of their existence is (*CH* IV. 4). The elect, since they are similar to god, can arrive at the gnosis of god (IV. 2; IX. 1; *Ascl.* 5). First and foremost, and at the simplest and most basic level, gnosis has to do with knowledge

⁴⁵ G. Sfameni Gasparro, 'Chaos e dualismo: la dialettica chaos-kosmos nell'ermetismo', *Cassiodorus*, 1 (1995), 11–28 (p. 19).

⁴⁶ Metempsychosis is not foreign to pagan Hermetism, according to which souls have been enclosed in the body as a punishment for earlier misdeeds and complain of their fate (*Kore Kosmou* 34–37; *Exc. Stob.* XXIV. 2–4).

of the world, which is sensible god (*Ascl.* 3, 6, 9–10; *CH* III. 3), but as a result of contemplation man is joined with god (I. 26; X. 6. 23; XI. 20; XII. 20), and he is the mortal god (X. 25; XII. 1). This knowledge can thus be called a *religio mentis* ('religion of the mind'), as is written in *Asclepius* 25.

The Perfect Man

Gnostics are 'perfect' (*CH* IV. 4), 'pious' (X. 19), and 'essential' (IX. 5; I. 15), and their number is, of course, limited (*Ascl.* 22; *Exc. Stob.* XI. 4–5). They are not subject to destiny (*CH* XII. 7. 9; *Exc. Stob.* XVIII. 3; *Ascl.* 11; Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* II. 15. 6). In the Hermetic system, however, the perfect are not such by nature; in contrast to the Gnostic teaching, divine reality is not thought to be present in them. According to Hermetism, they reach perfection on account of a free decision of their own. This certainty in individual free-will is not absolute, however. The movement of the heavens seems to have been responsible for the difference between 'essential' man and material man (*CH* IX. 5), and destiny is still a problem for perfects (XII. 4–6; *Exc. Stob.* VIII. 5). The masses, on the other hand, are stupid; they do not love 'those who are in knowledge' but rather think that they are insane (*CH* IX. 4; *Exc. Stob.* XI. 4–5).

In conclusion, Hermetic dualism is not radical like the Gnostic or Manichean variety.

There is not the slightest indication in this story [*scl.* of the creation of man in the *Poimandres*] that this creation is bad [...]. In Gnosticism the creation is bad, in Hermetism it is not. [...] It is the old and very wide-spread idea that the senses, and sexual desire in particular, draw the soul deeply into the world of matter and make him [*sic*] forget his [*sic*] divine origin — an idea which was found among pagan platonists, Christian theologians, gnostics and hermetists alike.⁴⁷

Salvation and Damnation

The salvation of man is an essential theme (perhaps the most urgent) for both Christianity and Hermetism; for this reason it will require a somewhat fuller treatment. G. Quispel has emphasized the Hermetic tone of one of Christ's statements: 'And

⁴⁷ R. van den Broek, 'Gnosticism and Hermetism in Antiquity: Two Roads to Salvation', in van den Broek, *Studies in Gnosticism and Alexandrian Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), pp. 3–21 (p. 19, p. 21).

this is life eternal, that they might *know* thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent' (John 17. 3).⁴⁸

The first form of salvation consists in possessing 'reverence' (*eusebeia*), which results from learning the true doctrine:

And I began proclaiming to mankind the beauty of reverence and gnosis. (*CH* I. 27)

Only one road travels from here to the beautiful — reverence combined with gnosis. (VI. 5)

Reverence is knowledge of god. (IX. 4)

For mankind this is the only deliverance, the gnosis of god. (X. 15; cf. X. 19: knowing the divine and doing wrong to no person is the fight of reverence)⁴⁹

So that [...] the human race might be saved by god. (I. 26)

[...] god saves. (IX. 5)

The virtue of the soul [...] is gnosis; for one who knows is good and reverent and already divine. (X. 9)

This salvation (i.e. knowledge) is the true life (I. 21. 26).⁵⁰ Whoever does not abandon his ignorance cannot be saved (I. 28. 32).

The treatise entitled *Crater* shows us other aspects of this kind of salvation (*CH* IV. 4. 5–6), and we hear about salvation above all at the end of the *Asclepius* (chap. 41):

⁴⁸ G. Quispel, 'Reincarnation and Magic in the *Asclepius*', in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, ed. by R. van den Broek and C. van Heertum (Amsterdam: Pelikaan, 2000), pp. 167–231 (p. 176); for the following discussion, cf. C. Moreschini, 'Soteria ermetica e soteria cristiana: affinità generiche e punti di contatto', in *Pagani e cristiani alla ricerca della salvezza (secoli I–III): XXXIV Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana Roma, 5–7 maggio 2005*, *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum*, 96 (Rome: Augustinianum, 2006), pp. 261–74.

⁴⁹ On this topic, see A. Wlosok, *Laktanz und die philosophische Gnosis* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1960), pp. 136–37; G. Sfameni Gasparro, 'La gnosi ermetica come iniziazione e mistero', *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni*, 36 (1965), 43–61 (repr. in Sfameni Gasparro, *Gnostica et Hermetica: Saggi sullo gnosticismo e sull'ermetismo* (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1982), pp. 309–30) (p. 314).

⁵⁰ In line with his interpretation, the similarity between the Judaic and Christian traditions is emphasized by Büchli, *Der Poimandres*, pp. 145–47. On this passage, see also the considerations of Quispel, 'Reincarnation and Magic in the *Asclepius*', pp. 177–78; Sfameni Gasparro, 'La gnosi ermetica', pp. 314–15; and J. Peste, *The Poimandres Group in Corpus Hermeticum: Myth, Mysticism and Gnosis in Late Antiquity* (Göteborg: Department of Religious Studies, University of Göteborg, 2002), pp. 86–92.

We thank you, supreme and most high god, *by whose grace alone* we have attained the light of your knowledge; holy name that must be honoured, the one name by which our ancestral faith blesses god alone, we thank you who deign to grant to all a father's fidelity, reverence, and love, along with any power that is sweeter, by giving us the gift of mind, reason, and understanding:

mind, by which we may know you;
reason, by which we may seek you in our dim suppositions;
knowledge, by which we may rejoice in knowing you.⁵¹

And we *who are saved by your power* do indeed rejoice because you have shown yourself to us wholly. We rejoice that *you have deigned to make us gods for eternity*,⁵² even while we depend on the body. For this is mankind's only means of giving thanks: knowledge of your majesty. (emphasis mine)

'Reverence combined with gnosis' protects the perfect man from the attack of demons, and those who know god are not bound by fate:

Reverence (*eusebeia*) [...] is the one safe guard. The reverent are not in the power of any evil demon nor of fate. God protects the reverent from all evil. The one and only good within man's power is reverence [...]. Reverence is the knowledge of god. (Hermetic text cited in Greek by Lactantius, *Div. instit.* II. 15. 6 = frag. 10 Nock-Festugière; translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified)

This statement also reappears in the *Asclepius* (chap. 29) (earlier in the *Logos teleios*,⁵³ of course) and, as Festugière has observed,⁵⁴ in Cyril of Alexandria (*Contra Iul.* IV, PG, 76, col. 701AB) and in two fragments of Zosimus (frags 20–21 Nock-Festugière, translation Scott):

Hermes and Zoroaster said that philosophers are above Destiny, for they find no joy in the happiness she gives, since they hold pleasure in subjection; and they are not harmed by the ills she inflicts, because they dwell at all times in the immaterial world [...]. Hermes, therefore, in his treatise on immateriality, also condemns magic, affirming that the spiritual man, who knows himself, ought not to set right by means of magic anything that is thought to be amiss, nor to use force to overcome necessity, but rather to let necessity go its own way according to its nature. A man ought to seek to know himself and God and hold his passions in subjection, and to let Destiny deal as she wills with the clay which belongs to her, that is, with his body.

⁵¹ Cf. *CH* XIII. 8: 'To us came knowledge of god, and when it comes, my child, ignorance has been expelled'; and 18: 'I take joy in the joy of the mind'.

⁵² Becoming a god is the culmination of human perfection (*CH* I. 26; IV. 7; XIII. 10).

⁵³ These passages are also considered on p. 43.

⁵⁴ Nock-Festugière, II, 336; see also Wlosok, *Laktanz*, pp. 211–12.

A second path to salvation is provided by the purification that takes place after death. The soul, abandoning the earthly world, crosses the seven celestial spheres, where it deposits the various forms of wickedness it had taken up during its formation at the hands of the stars (*CH* I. 25–26; IV. 8).⁵⁵

Or salvation is considered a palingenesis, that is, a real, concrete rebirth of the individual as a result of the divine powers having entered into him. A full explanation is found in a famous treatise, *CH* XIII, which from the sixteenth century on was considered ‘pre-Christian’ and even has the title ‘On Palingenesis’. The importance of this treatise was also understood by Reitzenstein, who considered it to be essentially mystical.⁵⁶ ‘The perfect man, it is said (XIII. 15), must hasten to strike his tent’ — not in a material sense, of course, but in a mystical one, which implies a transformation. It constitutes a mystery. Hermes spoke ‘in an enigmatic and obscure way’, and despite the pleas of his disciple Tat he added no explanation. ‘We must not debase the totality of the mystery by speaking of it to the crowd, but we must distribute it to those to whom the god himself wishes.’ The comprehension of that secret doctrine can only be granted by god. The miracle of palingenesis must come about gradually, thanks to Hermes’ teaching, and Tat shows his progress in the instruction of the mystery.⁵⁷

Palingenesis is the conclusion and the aim of all revelation. It unites with god he who has been so aided; indeed, it transforms him into a god. The ten divine powers enter into him. In Christianity, too, beginning in the second century, ‘rebirth in water and the spirit’, that is, baptism, was interpreted as a mystery and an illumination. ‘To baptize’ was denoted with the term ‘to illuminate’, so similar in Greek (*baptismos* = *photismos*). In baptism the spirit is received; what is more, the gift of the spirit is the demonstration of the true baptism, according to what Paul says to the Ephesians (Acts 19. 2–6) and what Peter preaches in the house of

⁵⁵ About the ascent of the soul and its various ideas, see Peste, *The Poimandres Group*, pp. 101–07.

⁵⁶ Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, pp. 215–33. For Reitzenstein, palingenesis constitutes the content of Egyptian mystery and more particularly of the mystery of Isis. Indeed, it is also described by Apuleius in the Isis book of the *Metamorphoses*, where it is said that those considered worthy of being adepts of a mystery religion are, ‘in a certain sense, reborn’ (XI. 21: *quodammodo renatos*), using a term that is characteristic of mysteries.

⁵⁷ Recalling that god is present in man during palingenesis, the text of *CH* XI. 20 can be understood: ‘Make yourself grow to immeasurable immensity, outleap all body, oustrip all time, become eternity and you will understand god.’ As Irenaeus says (*Adversus Haereses* I. 14. 7), referring to the teaching of the heretic Marcus the Magician, ‘the place of greatness is within us’.

the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10. 34–43). The divine powers' penetration of man, the cause of his transformation, has a parallel in the behavior of Marcus the Magician, as recounted by Ireneus (*Adversus haereses* I. 13. 3), and in the forms of preaching, well known to Celsus, who describes them with sarcasm and irony (Origen, *Contra Celsum* I. 50. 57).⁵⁸ In the *Poimandres*, the soul's purification of its vices and its ascent to god occur at the moment of death, whereas in *CH XIII* they are the result of palingenesis.

Festugière takes up and expands on Reitzenstein's exegesis.⁵⁹ The essential fruit of regeneration, he says, is neither the temporary gift of prophecy nor preaching (which is talked about in *Poimandres* 27–29), but a new state, in which man knows god as his father and knows himself as the son of god. His old self, its vices, and the tortures of matter have been substituted with a new self, that is, by the powers of god; these are presented as 'virtues', in the sense that they possess a substance despite being continence, fortitude, justice, and sincerity. The ordinary state of man has been changed, because now god inhabits him. This is corroborated by Porphyry, who says (*ad Marcellam* 21. 11. 19. 20) that the temple of god is the mind of the sage, or of the demon, or of Marcella herself.

But the novelty of the treatise consists in the fact that the supernatural powers, which are hypostases of god, penetrate man and construct the divine person, the logos, within him and, with their arrival alone, expel the vices that originate from the constitutive matter of man's former self. Whereas Platonic mysticism is an ontological mysticism that regards the being of man itself, the mysticism of *CH XIII* is a mysticism of renewal: it is necessary to be saved from without by means of a new birth. It is being itself that must be changed. Returning to oneself does not suffice; a new being must be born through the action of an external cause that lets its seed fall in the soul that is prepared for it. This presupposes an operation which is indicated in this phrase (*CH XIII*. 7): 'draw' this principle 'to you' and it 'will come'. Other Hermetic conceptions found in religious texts are cited by Festugière: the new man is 'planted', as is said in *CH XIII*. 2, in Philo (*De cherubim* 42–44), and in *Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV. 640–61; the idea of a union between man and god is found in the *Acta Thomae* 12, in the *Passio S. Caeciliae* 6, in the story of Nicodemus (John 3. 3–6), and in I Peter 1. 22–23; interior illumination, spoken of in the final hymn (*CH XIII*. 18), is, in the Imperial Age, a symbol common to every religion tending to mysticism, whether pagan or Christian. Tat wants to hear the hymn of the

⁵⁸ Quispel, 'Reincarnation and Magic in the *Asclepius*', pp. 181–82, refers to parallel texts of Judaic and Judaeo-Christian mysticism.

⁵⁹ Festugière, *La Révélation*, IV, 200–24.

Ogdoad (*CH* XIII. 15); Hermes composes a hymn to the Lord of creation, which cannot be taught (XIII. 16–20). Thanks to this hymn and celebration of praise, Tat's mind is fully illuminated (XIII. 21), and he expresses what he has seen in it.

The palingenesis of *CH* XIII, then, is a mystical experience. It is not a moral improvement, in the sense of man trying to approach god and imitate him solely with his own forces, like the Stoic sage who lets himself be guided by logos, or the sage of the *Timaeus* who harmonizes his thoughts with the order of the universe, or the sage of the *Theaetetus* who forces himself to resemble god. Man is renewed in the proper sense: within him lives another, just as Paul had said (Galatians 2. 20): 'I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.'⁶⁰ Once the light has been received, the Hermetic and the Christian are saved; but whereas the former is definitively saved and can no longer lose his salvation (from that moment on he acts as a regenerated man), for the Christian salvation exists only potentially. Salvation renders the gnostic definitively good, forever.

The problem is whether the treatise reflects a mystery, as Reitzenstein had said, or a Gnostic attitude, as Jonas claims.⁶¹ In fact, according to Tröger, Gnostic salvation is brought about by nature and implies the recovery of the original self, whereas mystery salvation entails a renewal, not a return to a primordial state. Regardless of the presence of terms related to mystery — such as deification through palingenesis, epoptism, ecstasy, purification, mystagogia, tradition, and sacrifice — the ideas and the mentality of the treatise are of a Gnostic kind, inspired by dualism and pessimism.

Tröger's interpretation was criticized by Grese, for whom the distinction between the two mentalities, Gnostic and Hermetic, is too rigid and aprioristic.⁶² In his view, the message of *CH* XIII is rather to demonstrate how man, whose birth was owed to necessity and remains subject to the influences of the zodiac, can achieve a palingenesis that will liberate him from the bonds of *ananke*. That this treatise can be linked to a mystery inspiration has also been argued by Sfameni Gasparro, who describes in it the tripartite structure typical of a mystery, namely the state of initial imperfection, crisis, and successive rebirth in a new and divine condition.⁶³

⁶⁰ See also Peste, *The Poimandres Group*, pp. 166–69.

⁶¹ K.-W. Tröger, *Mysterienglaube und Gnosis in Corpus Hermeticum XIII*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der althristlichen Literatur, 110 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1971).

⁶² W. C. Grese, *Corpus Hermeticum XIII and Early Christian Literature*, Studia ad Corpus Hellenisticum Novi Testamenti, 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1979).

⁶³ Sfameni Gasparro, 'La gnosi ermetica', pp. 312, 317, 322–25.

And thus even Mahé believes that we are not dealing with a ‘mystery of reading’, that is, entrusted to reading, as Tröger thought, but with a witness to the initiation ceremonies that actually took place in Hermetic confraternities.⁶⁴ Mahé, moreover, saw a close connection between the conception of palingenesis in the Coptic texts of Nag Hammadi (*The Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth*) and those of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.⁶⁵ Camplani observes that the central nucleus of the Coptic treatise consists in the account of an exceptional human experience, that is, the interior regeneration brought about by the ecstatic vision of the divine world. Whoever is thus regenerated is ‘generated in god’; god’s gift penetrates those praying from outside and is made possible by divine *pneuma*. The treatise *On the Eighth and Ninth* also establishes a close connection between palingenesis and illumination, whether the two phenomena happen simultaneously, as in *CH XIII*, or the latter constitutes the final phase of the former’s development, as in the Coptic treatise.⁶⁶

The parallels and points of contact between these Hermetic and Christian conceptions are obvious, and it is on their account that the Hermetic texts were long considered by Christian culture, from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance, to be an instrument of quasi-divine revelation. It is from this perspective that Camplani’s observation interests us, namely that the authors of *CH XIII* and especially the treatise *On the Eighth and Ninth* were also acquainted with Gnostic and Christian baptism, and that they incorporated and reformulated it, eliminating, however, the elements that were most distinctive and furthest from pagan spirituality, such as the idea of a saviour.⁶⁷

But palingenesis can be understood not only on the level of the individual; it can also regard all of humanity. According to the *Asclepius* (chap. 26), when the

⁶⁴ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, I, 54–59; Mahé, ‘La Voie d’immortalité’, p. 365. Mahé also cites a lecture of R. van den Broek, delivered in Amsterdam from 14 to 16 December 1990 (unpublished, to my knowledge), which argued that the episode described in *CH XIII* depicted a proper mystery rite.

⁶⁵ The subtitle of Mahé’s study ‘La Voie d’immortalité’, which opened up new paths for better understanding Hermetism, clarifies the author’s intention: to identify the points of contact between the Coptic text and Greek and Latin Hermetic texts.

⁶⁶ *Scritti ermetici in copto*, ed. by A. Camplani (Brescia: Paideia, 2000), p. 94. The ogdoad is the world in which angels and souls live, whereas the ennead is the place where the powers live, as is said in *Poimandres* 26 (Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, I, 38–40; Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, pp. 180–82).

⁶⁷ *Scritti ermetici in copto*, ed. by Camplani, p. 110. The issue is utterly ignored by Peste, *The Poimandres Group*, pp. 178–79.

evils of the world, that is, irreligiousness, disorder, and disinterest for all good things, reach their peak, the lord and father, the god whose power is highest, will turn to look upon man's wicked behaviour and crimes, and with an act of his will (that is to say his love) will oppose these vices and general perversion, extinguish error, and abolish iniquity with an inundation, with fire, or with the spread of pestilences. Then god will return the world to its former beauty, such that the world itself will seem still worthy of adoration and wonder, and with continuous benedictions and proclamations of praise the people of those future days will honour the god who creates and restores such a stately work. And this will be *the birth of the world*, that is, the re-establishment of all good things and a most holy and reverend restoration of nature itself. These words of the *Asclepius* could well appear to contemporary Christians as an imperfect form of apocalypse (and modern scholars have indeed spoken of a 'Hermetic apocalypse').

In contrast to the pure and simple equivalence between gnosis and salvation, and between palingenesis and salvation, there is a third conception: that salvation follows the judgement which man encounters after death. For Christians, this judgement is meted out by God, whereas for Hermetists it is entrusted to a demon. The mind, once purified (that is, once it has reached the teaching of the true doctrine), gains freedom from the body, for it is divine by nature and has received a body of fire, whereas it abandons the soul to judgement and to the justice it deserves (*CH X. 16*). Indeed, Hermetism distinguishes between soul and mind:

The human soul — not every soul, that is, but only the reverent — is in a sense demonic and divine. Such a soul becomes wholly mind after getting free of the body and fighting the fight of reverence. (Gnosis of god and doing wrong to no person is the fight of reverence.) The irreverent soul, however, stays in its own essence, punishing itself, seeking an earthly body to enter — a human body, to be sure. For no other body contains a human's soul; it is not allowed for a human soul to fall down into the body of an unreasoning animal. This is god's law, to protect the human soul against such an outrage. (*CH X. 19*)

Certain Hermetic passages provide us with interesting details about the make-up and function of the human soul. The soul must engage in war with itself, face a great struggle, and allow itself to be conquered by one part of itself only, the intellectual part.

It is a feud of one against two, of the intellectual part, struggling to mount upward, and the material part, which, united with the body, seeks to drag it down; and there is much strife and fighting between them. And it makes no small difference whether the one side or the other wins; for the one strives towards the Good, the others make their home among evils; the one yearns for freedom, the others are content with slavery. And if the two parts are vanquished, they stay quiet in themselves, and submissive to the ruling part; but if the one

part is defeated, it is carried off as a captive by the two, and the life it lives on earth is a life of *penal torment*. (*Exc. Stob.* II. B. 6–7, p. 14 Nock-Festugière; translation Scott, modified)⁶⁸

It is therefore necessary for the soul to be trained here on earth, before death, so that it not lose its way once it arrives in the place where it is allowed to see. ‘But men who love the body will never see the vision of the Beautiful and the Good’ (*Exc. Stob.* VI. 18; translation Scott).

The punishment of the soul consists — here on earth — in sin itself. *CH* X. 20–21 describes to great effect the scream of the soul that has been punished and tormented by the evil that is born within it and that it itself has procured through its own will or negligence. The *Poimandres* (chap. 23) also speaks of a *demon avenger* who hits man with the whip of fire and incites him to commit ever more evil, with the aim of saddling the guilty with even worse punishments later (after death). Thus, the wicked man, always driven to do evil, is unable to stop the flame that devours him. Sfameni Gasparro justly speaks of ‘a wholly interior hell’.⁶⁹

Other Hermetic fragments dealing with the problem of the nature, origin, and location of souls presuppose the conservation of their individuality after death. In *Excerptum Stobaei* XXIV. 1 it is said that the souls of demons subject to the sun inhabit the air, whereas men and other living beings inhabit the earth. Chapter 5 describes the difference between the various souls, and they are said (chap. 6) to take their characteristics from the angels and from the demons who take them down to earth.

⁶⁸ That two souls exist in man is a Hermetic doctrine alternative to that of the soul having parts. It is attested by Iamblichus (*On the Mysteries* VIII. 6; trans. by Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell, slightly modified): ‘As these writings [of the Hermetists] tell us, the human being has two souls: one derives from the primary intelligible, partaking also of the power of the demiurge while the other is contributed to us from the circuit of the heavenly bodies, and into this there slips the soul that contemplates god.’ When commenting on this passage of Iamblichus (see Giamblico, *I misteri degli Egiziani*, intro., trans., and notes by Claudio Moreschini (Milan: Rizzoli, 2003), p. 421), it seemed to me that its reference to Hermetism was obscure; now I would not be so certain. In fact, elsewhere we read (*Exc. Stob.* VIII. 5): ‘Now the intelligible substance, if it has drawn near to God, has power over itself, and in saving itself, it also saves the other part. As long as it is by itself, it is not subject to Necessity, and its choice is in accordance with Providence’; *Exc. Stob.* XVI. 6: ‘But the peculiar property of soul is that sort of movement which belongs to intelligible substance’; *Exc. Stob.* XVII. 1: ‘Soul then, Ammon, is a substance which is self-determining in the beginning; but when it has chosen that course of life which is dependent on Destiny [...] and it takes on as an appendage something irrational, which is similar to matter’ (translation Scott).

⁶⁹ G. Sfameni Gasparro, ‘Cosmo, male, salvezza nel “Poimandres” (*CH*, 1): tra apokalypsis e gnosis’, in *Apocalittica e gnosticismo: Atti del Colloquio internazionale Roma 18–19 giugno 1993*, ed. by M. V. Cerutti (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 1995), pp. 107–42 (p. 134).

In *Excerptum Stobaei* XXV. 1, Horus asks Isis where souls go that have gotten free of the body. Isis responds (chap. 2) that they are not poured into the air indistinctly, nor are they dispersed together with other winds without being able to go back into bodies; it seems, then, that metempsychosis is being referred to, through which

every soul, whether incarnated as a man or dwelling on earth in some other shape, knows whither it must go [scl. once freed from the body] [...]. If then it is so with the souls when they are immersed in flesh and blood, and if they do nothing against God's ordering even when they are undergoing punishments — for *ensomatosi*s is a punishment inflicted on them, — will they not much more act thus when they are released from this punishment, and have obtained the liberty which belongs to them by nature? (*Exc. Stob. XXV. 8*; translation Scott, modified)

Excerptum Stobaei XXVI has the title 'The Incarnation and Metempsychosis of Souls'. The Hermetic writer affirms the existence (chap. 3) of the *psychotamias* ('the overseer of souls') and the *psychopompos*, who sends souls forth and distributes them, giving them their place according to their incarnation. Both carry out their duty in obedience to the will of god.

Finally, the *Asclepius* also presents a conception according to which the upright man will be rewarded with freedom (once he has finished his service) from the chains of the world's prison;⁷⁰ his bonds to the mortal condition will be dissolved, such that god might restore him, pure and holy, to his best, that is, his most divine, part. On the other hand, those who have lived irreverently are denied the return to the heavens, and a horrible transmigration, unworthy of a holy soul, will put them into other bodies.⁷¹ These assertions are also found in the parallel Coptic translation of *NH* VI. 8. 76. 20–37,⁷² and they are corroborated by two passages of John the Lydian:

⁷⁰ A doctrine originally articulated by Plato, *Phaedo* 62b, but then fully diffused in the Platonizing culture of the imperial age. (The bibliography is well known to scholars and need not be cited here.)

⁷¹ That is, into bodies of animals and not of men. Whether metempsychosis could also take place in non-human bodies was a disputed question in Neoplatonism. Porphyry, for example, denied this possibility. According to the Manichaeans, all the elect escape reincarnation and return to the spiritual world of light. This idea can be found in Augustine, *Contra Faustum* XX. 21 (cited by Quispel, 'Reincarnation and Magic in the *Asclepius*', p. 185); see also G. Casadio, 'The Manichaean Metempsychosis: Typology and Historical Roots', in *Studia Manichaica: II. Internationaler Kongress zum Manichäismus, 6–10 August 1989*, ed. by G. Wiessner and H. J. Klimkeit (Wiesbaden: Harassowitz, 1992), pp. 105–30.

⁷² I have consulted them in the translation of Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 257–62 and 267–69, and *Scritti ermetici in copto*, ed. by Camplani, pp. 167–68.

Hermes the Egyptian in his treatise entitled 'perfect' says that the punisher demons are found in matter itself and punish the human race according to its deserts, whereas the purifier demons stand fixed in the air and, in the air's tempestuous and blazing circles that the poets and Plato himself in his *Phaedo* call 'Tartarus' and 'Pyriphlegethon', they purify the souls that seek to re-ascend after death; finally the savior demons, arranged in order at the moon, save souls. (*De mensibus* IV. 32)

Hermes the Egyptian says in his treatise entitled *Perfect Discourse*: 'there are punisher angels, found in matter, who torment souls. Others purify them. Their place is the air, and they purify the souls that wish to ascend upwards after their death, into the zones of the air where cold and hot are found [...]. Others still, located in the region of the moon, are saviors: they save souls.' (*De mens.* IV. 149)⁷³

⁷³ On these passages of John the Lydian, see Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 256–57. They are cited by Quispel, 'Reincarnation and Magic in the *Asclepius*', p. 183, who also mentions other coeval witnesses as a manifestation of the same spirit of the age.

LATE ANTIQUE CHRISTIAN HERMETISM

Christian culture took an early interest in the revelation of Trismegistus. This interest was also more profound than that of contemporary paganism, either Greek or Latin, in which neither speculation on Hermetic themes nor effective knowledge of them can be found.¹ Scholars have generally been little interested in Christian reworkings of Hermetic doctrines. Of course, the Christian variety is different from the original Hermetism of the Hellenistic Age. In an antiphilosophical interpretation, contrary to the view of Festugière, Mahé affirms: 'Hermetism is not a theory, nor a philosophical system, but a way, that is to say a progression. Consequently, the intention of the majority of Hermetic texts is to say not what exists, but what we ought to do, that is, how we ought to train our mind.'² Therefore, Christians interpreted this 'way' to immortality as a theosophy with ethical and theological doctrines, revealed by God to Trismegistus. Sfameni Gasparro observes that 'it is possible to identify a variety of positions in the way Christian writers use Hermetic passages, ranging from the simple mention

¹ An early study was furnished by G. Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo nelle testimonianze dei Padri', *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, 7 (1971), 215–51; later a short synthesis was provided by Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 204–11. My *Storia dell'ermetismo cristiano* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2000) was followed by A. Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos als Zeuge der Wahrheit: Die christliche Hermetikrezeption von Athenagoras bis Laktanz* (Berlin: Philo, 2002), which, however, takes into account neither Sfameni Gasparro's study nor mine; it will be mentioned only where it proposes a new interpretation; see my review in *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 11 (2005), 658–62.

² Mahé, 'La Voie d'immortalité', p. 365: 'L'hermétisme n'est pas une théorie, ni un système philosophique, mais une voie, c'est-à-dire une progression. Par conséquent, la plupart des textes hermétiques ont pour but non pas de nous dire ce qui est, mais ce que nous devons faire, c'est-à-dire comment nous devons exercer notre esprit.'

of 'Trismegistus' pronouncements, to the assumption of Hermetic formulations of specific philosophico-religious concepts, and finally to the transposition of Hermetic doctrines into a Christian (e.g., Christological) theological context, which gives them a meaning quite different from their own'.³

Western Christian Hermetism

From Apologetics to the Age of Constantine

It is no surprise that Tertullian, undisputedly the greatest Christian intellectual before the Age of Constantine, took an interest in Hermetism as part of his polemic against pagan culture. In his *Adversus Valentinianos* (15. 1), he ironically labels 'Trismegistus' 'the master of all the philosophers who study nature'. In accordance with Greek usage he calls Mercury by the title 'Trismegistus', thus providing the first attestation of it in Latin.⁴ Since he considers him the master of all the 'physical', that is, natural, philosophers, Tertullian sees him, as will Lactantius and others later, as a predecessor of pagan philosophy. Such is repeated in his *De anima* (2. 3): pagan philosophy claims to have drawn on the most ancient, sacred texts, to the point of believing that it had the gods themselves as teachers, not simply divine men or those who were divinely inspired (*divi*).⁵ The latter include Trismegistus, Orpheus, Museus, and Pherecydes, who were the teachers of Plato, Pythagoras, and others. This statement accords with the mentality of the age, when pagan thought was searching as far back in time as possible for the sources of its own wisdom, for the express purpose of conferring upon itself the dignity of divinely imparted revealed truth. Tertullian himself, as Judaeo-Christian culture before him, tends to place the sources of revelation further back in time, in the Old Testament, and thus in a period prior to that in which the first manifestations of pagan civilization appeared (with the poets Homer and Hesiod). Like Lactantius after him, he presumes a link between Plato and Hermes. But the conviction that there was a relationship between Plato and Egyptian culture was an ancient one,⁶ probably

³ Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo', p. 218.

⁴ An observation of J.-Cl. Fredouille in Tertullien, *Contre les Valentiniens*, vols I–II, introduction, critical text, and trans. by Fredouille, Sources Chrétiennes, 280–81 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1980), p. 281.

⁵ The meaning of *divi* oscillates between 'gods' and 'deified men'.

⁶ Such is attested, for example, in Apuleius, *De Platone et eius dogmate* I. 3. 186; Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum* III. 7; Cicero, *De re publica* I. 10. 16; Cicero, *De finibus* V. 29. 87.

based on the myths found in the *Phaedrus* and the *Timaeus*. In *De anima* 28. 1, Tertullian reaffirms the connection between Platonism and Hermetism. The doctrine of metempsychosis was professed by Plato in the *Phaedo* (70c), he says. According to some, Plato had learned it from Pythagoras, but according to Albinus, who considers the doctrine to be of divine origin, perhaps from Hermes Trismegistus. Albinus is one of the sources used by Tertullian in the *De anima*;⁷ therefore, he is a more ancient source for Hermetism than Tertullian and probably also than Athenagoras, since Albinus lived in the mid-second century and Athenagoras wrote his *Legatio* about AD 176.⁸

In any case, Tertullian utterly rejects the doctrine of metempsychosis, even if corroborated by Hermes, just as he had rejected it when it was proposed by Plato (*De anima* 31–35), for whom he nurtured very little sympathy, or by others. Against metempsychosis Tertullian adduces a passage of Trismegistus (*De anima* 33. 2), which is the oldest Hermetic quotation in Latin culture. Hermes, Tertullian says, claims that human souls must undergo judgement after death and give an account of what they have done, good or evil; consequently they will not be reabsorbed into the World Soul but will retain their individuality intact. Hermes, then, denies the doctrine of metempsychosis, which forces the soul to lose its peculiar characteristics as a result of the passage from one body to another. This testimony is of the utmost interest, because Tertullian reports it as if it were a proper quotation of Hermetic teaching.⁹ This doctrine of the future judgement reserved for souls is attested (in the Latin milieu) one hundred fifty years after Tertullian, by the *Asclepius*: ‘when the soul withdraws from the body, it passes to the jurisdiction of the chief demon who weighs and judges its merit’ (chap. 28); the same chapter speaks of punishments that the soul will have to suffer as it is buffeted between heaven and earth.¹⁰

Another Hermetic doctrine referred to by Tertullian, although the name of Mercury is not explicitly mentioned, is found in *De anima* 15. 4–5. It deals with

⁷ Albinus and Tertullian are mentioned a few times in Festugière, *Revelation*, I, 79; Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, p. 198.

⁸ On Athenagoras, see p. 82.

⁹ Regarding the presence of this doctrine in Hermetism, J. H. Waszink (Q. S. F. Tertulliani, *De anima*, ed. with intro. and commentary by Waszink (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1947), p. 395) refers to *Poimandres* 26; *Exc. Stob.* XXV. 4 and XXV. 3. Löw (*Hermes Trismegistos*, p. 52 n. 198) does not believe it to be a Hermetic doctrine at all, considering that it is introduced only by the generic term *Aegyptii*. But *Aegyptii* is also used in Tertulliani, *De anima* 15. 5, where it almost certainly denotes Hermetic doctrines.

¹⁰ On the doctrine of punishment and divine reward, see above, pp. 23–25.

a problem of ancient medicine that was also touched on by Hermetism (a parallel is *Exc. Stob.* XXIV. 13). The ruling or rational part of man (the *principale* or *hegemonikon* of the Stoics) is found in the soul, almost in the centre of the body, as was taught by the Egyptians and those who wrote about divine matters, as well as by the famous verses of Orpheus and Empedocles (Diels-Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, B 105. 3). Thus, in the fragment of Stobaeus, the heart is said to be found in the centre of man's body, just as the most holy doctrine of Hermes is found at the centre of the earth, that is to say in Egypt. This is interesting evidence of the pride, typically Egyptian, reflected in the Hermetic writings, which consider Egypt to be the centre of the universe.¹¹

A few decades after Tertullian, the *Quod idola di non sint* appeared, written perhaps by an anonymous author, perhaps by Cyprian.¹² It contains very interesting evidence of the pagan intellectual *koine* characteristic of Late Antiquity. The work deals with a problem that weighed particularly on Christian apologists, namely exposing the true nature of idols, which were ostensibly none other than demons. Here they are said to hide in the statues and the images that are consecrated to them (chaps 6–7).¹³ They are mendacious spirits, vagabonds, vicious and lost, who never cease to do evil to men in order to ruin them, just as they themselves are condemned to be ruined. One example is the demon of Socrates.¹⁴ Typically Christian is also the connection that Cyprian makes between magic (of which Ostanès, a magician also famous among the pagans, is mentioned as a principle

¹¹ Finally, we must mention Quispel's hypothesis ('Hermes Trismegistus and Tertullian', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 43 (1989), 188–90), that the exclamation, natural for human beings: 'Deus bonus [...] sed homo malus' (Tertullian, *De testimonio animae* 2. 2), which Tertullian mentions as evidence of the presence of the idea of God in every soul (according to his doctrine of the 'anima naturaliter christiana'), is of Hermetic origin, since it corresponds to the nineteenth sentence contained in the *Exc. Stob.* XI. Nevertheless, the context of Tertullian's statement is not Hermetic, but Stoic. The question arises whether these statements of Tertullian and other Christian writers derive from one of the writings that have come down to us (*Corpus Hermeticum* or *Excerpta Stobaei*), but we can almost never give a certain reply.

¹² The *Quod idola* is posterior to Minucius Felix, from whose *Octavius* it takes certain observations. It is attributed to Cyprian by Jerome (*Epistula* 70. 5) and Augustine (*De baptismo parvulorum* VI. 44. 87: see p. 75).

¹³ Chap. 6 derives from Minucius Felix's *Octavius* (26–27), to which the testimony of Hermes is added.

¹⁴ See the earlier testimony of Apuleius (*De deo Socratis* 20. 165–66) and Tertullian (*Apologeticum* 22. 1, 46. 5).

representative¹⁵) and demons, who are its inspirers and teachers. But Ostanes is also mentioned for two doctrines: the first is that the aspect of the true god cannot be known; the second is that the true angels¹⁶ abide in the presence of God. According to Cyprian, this doctrine of Ostanes was taken up by Plato, who speaks of a lone god and angels,¹⁷ and Hermes is also in agreement with him. This writer, too, then, connects Plato to Hermes Trismegistus and Ostanes, symbols of Eastern wisdom.

The Age of the Tetrarchs and of Constantine

In this historico-cultural matrix, the syncretism that had already begun in the age of the Severan emperors becomes accentuated. Arnobius and Lactantius remained pagans until a mature age, and they are characterized by a very superficial Christianity, as the ancients themselves observed.¹⁸ Despite their defence of Christianity, which in Arnobius manifests itself in attitudes that are at times excessive, the religion of Arnobius and Lactantius is a 'philosophy' not much different from that of a pagan of the age, and certain of their statements could also have appeared in the *Panegyrici Latini* or in Firmicus Maternus's *Matheseos libri*. Their doctrines are much closer to the theism of the pagans than to the preaching of the Gospels. It is individuals of their ilk to whom Symmachus appealed when proposing his ideal of religious freedom, arguing that 'such a great mystery as god cannot be arrived at by one road alone'.¹⁹

Arnobius

For this reason, Arnobius, although waging a harsh polemic against paganism, addressed pagan philosophies (including that of Hermes) and challenged them to

¹⁵ Ostanes was a legendary Persian magician, previously mentioned, for example, by Apuleius (*De magia* 90) and Minucius Felix (*Oct.* 26. 11).

¹⁶ With this clarification the author means the angels of the Christian religion; it is a necessary clarification, since 'angels' could also refer to demons, who according to Platonic and late antique doctrine in general were intermediaries between gods and men.

¹⁷ This is a reference to the doctrine of the demiurge and his creation of the minor gods, as described in Plato's *Timaeus* (41a).

¹⁸ For Arnobius, see Jerome, *Epistula* 58. 10; but Lactantius, too, was similarly criticized by Jerome: see *Epistulae* 58. 10 and 84. 7 and *Commentarii in Epistolam Pauli apostoli ad Galatas* II. 4. 6.

¹⁹ In his *Relatio III* (10), sent to Emperor Valentinian II apropos the debate with Ambrose over the Altar of Victory, Symmachus essentially requested freedom of worship for ancient Roman paganism.

teach doctrines different from Christian ones. Thus, instead of refuting paganism, he essentially accepts it. In his *Adversus nationes* II. 13, he addresses all those who profess Hermetism, Platonism, Pythagoreanism, and similar doctrines, and he challenges them to deny that they are akin to Christian ones. Indeed, Mercury, Plato, and Pythagoras maintained the existence of a divine father and lord of the universe; they recommended dedicating oneself to contemplation and not thinking about earthly things; like the Christians, they believed in the end of the world; and a central tenet of their philosophy was the immortality of the soul.²⁰ Regarding Hermetism, then, Arnobius anticipates what Lactantius will do in a fuller and more systematic way.

That two Africans like Arnobius and Lactantius were interested in Hermetism has caused some scholars to think that there was a distinct African form of Hermetism. This was the position of J. Carcopino²¹ and then A. Wlosok,²² whereas A. Löw, who observes that a proper Hermetic tradition begins only with Lactantius, is not convinced of it. Arnobius's testimony, in his opinion, is of limited value.²³ In my opinion, the hypothesis of Carcopino and Wlosok is enticing, but for now it lacks a solid basis.

²⁰ Scholars have mainly been interested in identifying the *virī novi* referred to in the following chapter (15). Whoever they were (and they have been thought to be Hermetists: see A.-J. Festugière, 'La Doctrine des "virī novi" sur l'origine et le sort des âmes', in Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, pp. 261–312 (pp. 300–02); Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 199–200), the passage we have just considered is more illuminating for the issues at hand here.

²¹ J. Carcopino, *Aspects Mystiques de la Rome Païenne* (Paris: L'Artisan du livre, 1942), especially chap. 5, 'Sur les Traces de l'Hermétisme africain', pp. 207–314.

²² Wlosok, *Laktanz*, pp. 254–55.

²³ On Lactantius, see Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*. Löw's study provides the basis for E. De Palma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius & Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 64–90, and J. Walter, *Pagane Texte und Wertvorstellungen bei Laktanz* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), pp. 152–71. There is no scholarly consensus regarding how much Hermes was used by Lactantius, or for what purpose. Recently, scholars have tended to limit the importance of Hermetism for Lactantius's thought, but I believe that Wlosok's interpretation, which sees Hermetism as the instrument used by Lactantius to give his doctrine a theosophic connotation, is still valid. I am therefore in agreement with Freund in this regard, although he only dedicates two short pages (pp. 50–52) to the problem and provides the usual inadequate bibliographical information (he ignores Sfameni Gasparro's study, Siniscalco is always cited as 'Siniscalco', etc.): Laktanz, *Divinae institutiones*, vol. VII: *De vita beata*, intro., text, trans., and commentary by St. Freund (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009).

Lactantius

Lactantius marks a moment of capital importance in the history of Christian Hermetism. He was more convinced than anyone of the affinity between Hermetic doctrines (which he systematically sought out) and Christian ones, and his interpretation enjoyed wide diffusion in the Middle Ages.

Lactantius's Judgement of Hermes

Lactantius (*Div. instit.* 1. 6. 2) relies on a passage of Cicero (*De natura deorum* III. 22. 56) in which five Mercuries are distinguished, the last of whom supposedly taught the Egyptians laws and letters and had the name of Theut.²⁴ Cicero's information would continue to be of fundamental importance for the history of Hermetism down to the sixteenth century. But from Cicero onwards, Hermetism came to be defined better in its philosophical structures, on account of which Lactantius adds that Hermes,

though he was a man, nevertheless was so very old and so very learned in all manner of scholarship that his knowledge of many facts and skills gave him the extra name of Trismegistus. He wrote many books in great quantity which are relevant to knowledge of things divine.²⁵ (*Div. instit.* 1. 6. 3–4; translation Bowen and Garnsey)

Hermes possesses great authority:

Let us now pass to evidence from the gods. First, however, I will put forward one item which is like divine evidence in two respects: it is of exceeding antiquity, and the human being whom I shall name has been translated to the gods.²⁶ (*Div. instit.* 1. 6. 1; translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified)

²⁴ This is also said by Varro (quoted by Augustine, *De civitate Dei* VII. 14). What the two writers tell us is not quite what interests us, however: the Hermes they know (by then a humanized Hermes, as Pease observes) is not the one who reveals salvation to men and furnishes them with the gnosis of god; he procures only human knowledge, like letters and writing. This Hermes is still one of the numerous Hellenistic divinities that the philosophical schools, such as the Stoics and the Academics, interpreted in a rational way, albeit for different ends: the Stoics to justify popular religion, the Academics to mock anthropomorphism and polytheism. See Marci Tulli Ciceronis, *De natura deorum libri: Liber secundus et tertius*, ed. by A. S. Pease (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 112–14; Festugière, *Révélation*, I, 70–73. Pease observes that Hermes was commonly thought of as the 'bringer of the word' in the culture of the Christian era.

²⁵ 'Qui tametsi homo fuit, antiquissimus tamen et instructissimus omni genere doctrinae adeo ut ei multarum rerum et artium scientia Trismegisto cognomen imponeret. Hic scripsit libros et quidem multos ad cognitionem divinarum rerum pertinentes.'

²⁶ 'Nunc ad divina testimonia transeamus. Sed prius unum proferam, quod est simile divino et ob nimiam vetustatem et quod is quem nominabo ex hominibus in deos relatus est.'

Exceeding antiquity (*nimia vetustas*) is a guarantee of a true doctrine. Hermes' followers believed in the divine origin of the doctrine that had been revealed to them. For Lactantius, such a doctrine is of course only 'nearly divine' (only the Christian one is divine), but it is nevertheless useful for elaborating upon Christian dogma. This is one of the most significant aspects of his theism: for the sole purpose of finding a forecast of his certainty that Christian wisdom was the most ancient, he does not hesitate to misinterpret in a Christian sense, as we shall see, certain Hermetic teachings. Thus, Hermes' prerogative of possessing a most profound wisdom and of having been much more ancient than the Greek philosophers is repeated by Lactantius in *De ira Dei* 11. 12 and *Epitome* 4. 4. Following Cicero's testimony, he emphasizes the divine dignity that the Egyptians attributed to Hermes on account of his *virtutes* and knowledge, his title of *Termaximus*,²⁷ and his greater antiquity with respect to Plato, Pythagoras, and the Seven Wise Men. Trismegistus follows the teaching of the prophets (*Div. instit.* VI. 25. 10) and spoke of the mysteries of the Father and the Son (IV. 27. 20), although (as the context of this passage seems to admit) he gained his knowledge of the truth from the teaching of demons (a limitation that anticipates Augustine). Indeed, Trismegistus somehow investigated truth entire (one might say) and often described the virtues and the majesty of the Word of God (IV. 9. 3).

This faith in Trismegistus's authority is not so sturdy, however, in *Divinae Institutiones* VII. 13. 4–5, where Lactantius, regarding Christian anthropology, quotes Hermes' opinion and observes:

It may be that Hermes should be counted among the philosophers, even though he was translated to the gods and is honoured under the name of Mercury by the Egyptians; perhaps he deserves no more attention than Plato and Pythagoras. We should then be looking for a more authoritative piece of evidence.²⁸ (translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified)

Therefore Lactantius goes on to consider the testimony of the Sacred Scriptures. As a matter of fact, this passage presents no difficulty at all. Lactantius, like all Christian apologists, is open to pagan wisdom but on one condition: that it not contradict the Christian tradition. In such a case Lactantius abandons even Hermes and turns to the authority of Sacred Scripture.

²⁷ A Latinization of the Greek term, usually rendered *Trismegistus*, as observed by Ch. Ingre-meau (Lactance, *La Colère de Dieu*, intro., French trans., and notes by Ingre-meau, Sources Chrétiennes, 289 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1982), *ad locum*).

²⁸ 'Sed hunc fortasse aliquis in numero philosophorum computet, quamvis in deos relatus Mercurii nomine ab Aegyptiis honoretur nec plus ei auctoritatis tribuat quam Platoni aut Pythagorae. Maius igitur testimonium requiramus.'

Agreement between Hermes and Christianity

The doctrine of god. According to Lactantius, Hermes, like the Christians, believes in the existence of a supreme, lone god whom he calls by the name of 'lord' and 'father' (*Div. instit.* I. 6. 4; *Epit.* 4. 4). And in fact the Hermetic writings also give the highest god the title of *dominus* and *pater*.²⁹ Furthermore, Hermes' god has no name, 'precisely because of his uniqueness' (*ob ipsam scilicet unitatem*). 'God is one, and what is one needs no name. He that is is nameless' (*Div. instit.* I. 6. 4; translation Bowen and Garnsey), and names, characterizing as they do an individual entity, are only necessary when there is a multiplicity of individuals.³⁰ Borrowing a concept from Tertullian, Lactantius concludes that God is the *nomen proprium* of God.³¹

Epitome 4. 4–5 contains a Hermetic text that begins thus: 'this is Hermes' exordium, which he writes to his son' (who is either Tat or Ammon). This text has the prophetic and sententious tone typical of the treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Then it continues: 'to comprehend God is difficult, to speak about him to others is utterly impossible'. This sentence is also found in *De ira* 11. 11–12 and derives from the famous affirmation of the *Timaean* (28c), probably by way of *Excerptum Stobaei* I.³² It is probably from the same *excerptum* from which Lactantius takes his

²⁹ The use of *dominus* and *pater* by Christian and Hermetic writers is treated by Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo', pp. 219–23. According to Christian Hermetists, the use of these titles for God confirms Hermetism's proximity to the true religion. These names are also found in the *Asclepius* (chaps 22 and 26).

³⁰ The relationship between god's namelessness and oneness in the Hermetic texts is also pointed out by Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo', p. 223.

³¹ See Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem* I. 7; R. Braun, *Deus Christianorum: Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien*, 2nd edn (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977), pp. 30–36, for the subject of the 'name of God'.

³² On this point, see Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo', p. 225. Lactantius also makes recourse to this Platonic affirmation elsewhere — see Wlosok, *Laktanz*, pp. 201–04; V. Loi, *Lattanzio nella storia del linguaggio e del pensiero teologico pre-niceno* (Zürich: Pas Verlag, 1970), pp. 11–12 — but the *Timaean* enjoyed wide diffusion in the Imperial Age; see A. D. Nock, 'The Exegesis of *Timaean* 28c', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 16 (1962), 79–96. That the presence of this Platonic concept in Hermetic texts means that Hermetism was penetrated by Middle Platonism, as Wlosok maintains, is unlikely. It is true that the Hermetic text differs from Plato's text and from the Middle Platonic reworking, and on this account Löw (*Hermes Trismegistos*, p. 189) believes that the modifications of the *Excerptum* need not be attributed to the Hermetic author but rather derive from Middle Platonism, and that a Hermetic reception can be spoken of only if Trismegistus is explicitly cited as the author of the passage. In my view, it is a normal case of one philosophy (in this case, a theosophy) borrowing a concept from another.

explanation:³³ ‘for the perfect cannot be understood by the imperfect, nor the invisible by the visible’ (*Epit.* 4. 5).³⁴

His works are visible to the eye, but how he made them is not visible even to the mind’s eye, because, as Hermes says, mortal cannot approach immortal, nor temporal perpetual, nor corruptible incorruptible; cannot get close, that is, and pursue it intellectually.³⁵ (*Div. instit.* II. 8. 68; translation Bowen and Garnsey)

Connected to *Divinae Institutiones* I. 6. 4–5 is *Epitome* 4. 4–5, which adds two other ideas. The first, which clarifies the fact that god is he who is, asserts that ‘god has no fathers, because he exists from himself and because of himself’. Therefore, according to Hermes, god, not having had a beginning, was not only ‘without a mother’ but also ‘without a father’. That God was without a mother had also been affirmed by the famous oracle of Colophon (*Div. instit.* I. 7. 1–2):³⁶

What about the famous ‘thrice greatest’ Mercury? [...] Does he not call god not only ‘without a mother’, as Apollo says, but also ‘without a father’, because he has no origins anywhere at all?³⁷ (translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified)

The idea that God is without father and mother is found elsewhere in Lactantius. In *Divinae Institutiones* IV. 8. 5, the work’s most recent editors, Heck and Wlosok, correctly read: ‘arseniothelyn [...] autopatora et autometora’, thus retaining *arseniothelyn* as a not wholly spurious word (and in fact *arsenothelys* exists, as we shall have occasion to see, pp. 61–62). In *Divinae Institutiones* IV. 13. 2 Lactantius says: ‘having no parents, he is most accurately called “without a father” and “without a mother” by Trismegistus because he was born of no one’ (translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified). The two terms, ‘without a father’ and ‘without a

³³ According to *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. by Nock and trans. by Festugière, IV, 108n.; see also Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*, pp. 177–78.

³⁴ ‘perfectum enim ab imperfecto, invisibile a visibili non potest comprehendi’.

³⁵ ‘Opera ipsius videntur oculis, quomodo autem illa fecerit, ne mente quidem videtur, quia, ut Hermes ait, mortale immortalis, temporale perpetuo, corruptibile incorrupto propinquare non potest, id est propius accedere et intellegentia subsequi.’

³⁶ Indispensable for a better understanding of late antique religiosity, of which this oracle is a precious witness, is S. Pricoco, ‘Un oracolo di Apollo su Dio’, *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa*, 23 (1987), 3–36. This oracle was also adduced by Patrizi, *Nova de universis philosophia, Panaugias liber decimus* (Ferrariae: Apud Benedictum Mammarelli, 1591), p. 23, who naturally alerts the reader that the Apollo of this oracle (whom Patrizi considered the Delphic Apollo) could be either an evil demon or a ‘bonus loci Genius sive Angelus, ut ipse se nominat’.

³⁷ ‘Quid quod Mercurius ille Termaximus [...] non modo *ametora*, ut Apollo, sed *apatora* quoque appellat Deum, quod origo illi non sit aliunde?’

mother', are common in Christian culture. 'Without a father' and 'without a mother' were the designations that the author of Hebrews (7. 3), in his typological interpretation of Melchizedek, king of Salem (see Genesis 14. 19), attributed to Christ. They thence became common in Christian culture, especially after anti-Arian writers used them to emphasize the divine origin of the Son of God (without a mother) and the human origin of Christ (without a father).³⁸ 'Without a father' was also employed by certain Gnostic currents: Barbelognostics (Epiphanius, *Panarion*, Holl, I, 287. 11) and Valentinians, who used it as an attribute for the first eon, the Abyss (*Panarion*, I, 390. 10 and 394. 1).

This doctrine might derive from Egyptian culture;³⁹ nevertheless (and here let us repeat what we have observed above, namely that this 'Egyptianness' must be understood as filtered through the Greek culture of the Hellenistic period), it was also diffused in the pagan and Christian culture of the epoch. In fact, it is already found in Aelius Aristides, in his *Hymn to Zeus* (chaps 8–9), composed during his residence in Egypt:

But he (Zeus) is the first and oldest and founder of the Universe, *born of himself*. It cannot be said when he was born, but he existed from the beginning and will always exist, *father to himself* and one too great to be born from another [...] so still earlier *he created himself from himself* and required nothing of any second person for his existence. (translation Behr; emphasis added)⁴⁰

It then recurs in theosophical writers, such as the author of the *Orphic Hymns* (10. 10: the terms are feminized apropos the divinity Physis) and Synesius (*Hymn*. 1. 147): 'What are you not, o Lord? Father of all fathers, father of yourself, forefather, without a father' (*autopator, propator, apator*). New is the passage cited by Pseudo-Dydimus, *De Trinitate* II. 5. 9: 'One alone is God, father of himself (*autopator*), from whom all these earthly things had their origin.' Dydimus asserts that this verse is one of 'those foreign to Christianity', and it has not been identified. It probably belongs to a theosophy of the Orphic or Chaldaean variety, or to one of the theological oracles in verse that circulated in Late Antiquity. John Malalas (*Chronographia*;

³⁸ Thus, for example, Gregory of Nazianzus (*Carmina* II. II. 7; PG, 38, col. 1571A) used it to denote Christ, whose advent silenced Apollo's oracle.

³⁹ See Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, I, 48–52; II, 291.

⁴⁰ J. Amann, *Die Zeusrede des Ailios Aristeides* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1931), pp. 31–34; C. Moreschini, 'Elio Aristide ed il platonismo del secondo secolo', in *Plutarco e la cultura della sua età: Atti del X Convegno plutarco, Fisciano–Paestum, 27–29 ottobre 2005*, ed. by P. Volpe Cacciatore and F. Ferrari (Naples: D'Auria, 2007), pp. 87–102 (pp. 99–101). Aristides, like the Hermetists, expressed this Aegyptian doctrine in Greek terms.

PG, 97, col. 144B) quotes an oracle that was supposedly given to the Pharaoh in a most ancient time (although it must also be late antique): 'This is God, father of himself, without a father, father (*autopator*, *apator*, *pater*), son of himself.'

Among the Neoplatonists, Porphyry (*Historia Philosopha*, frag. 18⁴¹) utilizes this concept for his interpretation of the Platonic triad Good – Mind – World Soul:

Mind is pre-eternally preceded by the Good, moving by its own cause, god, because he is son and father of himself (*autopator*): indeed, the procession of Mind did not come about because the Good moved to generate it, but Mind proceeded from god generating himself (*autogonos*). (as quoted in Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Iul.* I. 45)

This Hermetic doctrine is also known to Iamblichus:

Prior to the true beings and to the universal principles there is one god, prior cause even of the first god and king, remaining unmoved in the singularity of his own unity. For no object of intellection is linked to him, nor anything else. He is established as a paradigm *for the self-fathering, self-generating* and only-fathered *God* who is true Good; for it is something greater, and primary, and fount of all things, and basic root of all the first objects of intellection, which are the forms. From this One there has autonomously shone forth the self-sufficient god, for which reason *he is termed 'father of himself' and 'principle of himself'*; for he is first principle and god of gods, a monad springing from the One, pre-essential and first principle of essence. (*On the Mysteries* VIII. 2; translation Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell; emphasis added)⁴²

In the Latin context, finally, the same doctrine is found in a contemporary of Lactantius, Firmicus Maternus:

Whoever you are, god [...], you are equally father and mother of all things, you are your own father and son, bound by one grade of relation.⁴³ (*Mathesis* V. *prae*f. 3)

Nevertheless, elsewhere Lactantius shows himself to be less favourable to this Hermetic doctrine. In *Divinae Institutiones* IV. 8. 8–9, in an effort to explain how the Father was able to have a Son by means of a particular kind of generation, he

⁴¹ Porphyre, *Vie de Pythagore, Lettre à Marcella*, ed. by É. des Places, S.J., with an afterword by A.-Ph. Segonds (Paris: Société d'Édition Les Belles Lettres, 1982), pp. 193–94.

⁴² On this problem, see J. Whittaker, 'The Historical Background of Proclus' Doctrine of the *Authypostata*', in *De Iamblique à Proclus* (Geneva: Entretiens de la Fondation Hardt, 1975), pp. 193–230 (pp. 219–20); Whittaker, 'Self-Generating Principles in Second-Century Gnostic Systems', in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. I: *The School of Valentinus*, ed. by B. Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980), pp. 176–89; Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo', p. 234 and n. 80.

⁴³ 'Quicumque es deus [...], tu omnium pater pariter ac mater, tu tibi pater ac filius, uno vinculo necessitudinis obligatus.'

denies the possibility of a physical union; just before (IV. 8. 4) he also rejects the Orphic doctrine (frag. 81 Kern) according to which God needed to have the nature of both sexes in order to generate the Son. Thus Hermes, too, is wrong, since for him God was 'father and mother of himself'. It is rare to find a criticism of Hermes in Lactantius, even a mild one.⁴⁴ Perhaps he was not aware of previously having said something different?

This first section, on the demonstration of the existence of a supreme and unknowable God, can be concluded thus: Lactantius made use of a Hermetic treatise akin to the doctrine of the *Timaeus*. This lost Hermetic writing would seem to appear in *Divinae Institutiones* I. 6. 4–5 and II. 8. 68, I. 7. 2, IV. 8. 5, and IV. 13. 2 with *Epitome* 4. 4–5 and *De ira* 11. 11–12.⁴⁵

The son of god. 'The Son of God is so mighty, so dear to the highest God, that his name is unknown not only to men but also to the angels. Only God the Father knows it' (*Div. instit.* IV. 7. 2–3).⁴⁶ This is attested by Hermes as well, who says that 'the cause of this cause is the will of God the good God, whose name cannot be uttered by human mouth' (*Div. instit.* IV. 7. 3 = frag. 11a Nock-Festugière; translation Bowen and Garnsey).

The Hermetic passage is cited in Greek by Lactantius, and for this reason it has come down to us seriously corrupted.⁴⁷ The Greek quotation continues (frag. 12a Nock-Festugière):

And a little further on (to his son): 'There is, my child, an account (*logos*) of wisdom, unspeakable and holy, concerning (*peri*) God who is the sole lord of all, the God who foresees all,⁴⁸ whose naming is beyond mankind.' (translation Bowen and Garnsey)⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*, pp. 205–06, also sees this as a mild criticism.

⁴⁵ This succession of passages is also traced by Löw, although it had already been proposed in my *Dall' 'Asclepius', al 'Crater Hermetis': Studi sull'hermetismo latino tardoantico e rinascimentale* (Pisa: Giardini, 1985), pp. 29–31.

⁴⁶ The same is found, although briefly summarized, in *Epit.* 37. 8.

⁴⁷ The reading we follow is a correction of Stadtmüller based on *CH* XIV. 9; it has been accepted by Brand, Monat, and Heck in their editions of Lactantius.

⁴⁸ Nock-Festugière and Monat (Lactance, *Institutions divines livre IV*, intro., critical text, trans., notes, and index by P. Monat, Sources Chrétiennes, 377 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1992)), though, translate Lactantius's *proennounenou theou* as 'conçu avant toutes choses', and this seems to me the best translation.

⁴⁹ In a later consideration of the same question (*Div. instit.* IV. 9. 3), making reference to the above-quoted IV. 7. 3, Lactantius specifies: 'as the example we cited above makes clear', where he says that there exists an ineffable and holy word whose explanation is beyond human limitations.

Lactantius, then, has attributed the quality of ineffability to the second God (who in his eyes is the Son), even though in the Hermetic text it logically had to apply to the first god.⁵⁰ The name of this second God is unknown to men (see Apocalypse 19. 12) and is known only to the Father; men know him, however, as 'Jesus', which means 'saviour', and as 'Christ', which means 'king' (*Div. instit.* IV. 7. 4).⁵¹

'The cause of this cause is the will of God the good God', reads the Hermetic text. The explanation is that the cause of the cause (of the world) is the first god, who, on account of his goodness, generates the second god, who is in turn the cause of the existence of the world.⁵² Lactantius, then, skips from the meaning of *logos* = 'word' (which was the meaning of the Hermetic fragment) to that of *logos* = Word of God — but not by mistake.⁵³ For this oscillation between human *logos* and hypostatic Logos is common in apologetics and is a function of the Greek language. Second, changing the meaning of *peri*, Lactantius interprets the syntagm 'word *concerning* God' as 'the Word that abides *in the presence of* God', that is, 'with God' (John 1. 1).

Thus we can see that Lactantius presents a Christian theology adjusted to the syncretistic — and only superficially Christianized — milieu in which he lived.

Cosmology. Hermetic cosmology grew out of Egyptian doctrines, as Iversen showed.⁵⁴ Yet it is also the heir to a philosophical tradition that, beginning with Plato and continuing at various levels of greater and lesser cultural sophistication in Hellenistic and Roman times, celebrates the *kosmos* as the product of the creative activity of God, manifested, thanks to his infinite providence, in the beauty and perfection of the universe. Christian apologetics had subsumed these doctrines without difficulty. And Lactantius found very authoritative corroboration for

⁵⁰ See Scott, *Hermetica*, ed. by Ferguson, IV, 483; *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. by Nock and trans. by Festugière, IV, 110.

⁵¹ The first of these two interpretations of the Son of God is taken from Matthew 1. 22, whereas 'king' is the traditional interpretation of the meaning of Christ, which means 'anointed by the Lord': Christ is he who has received the royal unction. And later: The Son of God has one name among men, by whom he is called 'Jesus', and another, unknown to us, among the angels. Indeed, the name of 'Christ' is not a proper name but a name that indicates his power as the one 'anointed by God' (IV. 7. 4).

⁵² This statement will be fundamentally important to medieval Hermetism (pp. 93–95). God is the cause since he is the good: 'That is what god is, the good, all power to make all things' (*CH* XIV. 9).

⁵³ As interpreted by Nock and Festugière (*Corpus Hermeticum*, *ad locum*).

⁵⁴ Iversen, *Egyptian and Hermetic Doctrine*, pp. 8–25.

them in Hermetism.⁵⁵ It was, then, divine providence that created the world (*Div. instit.* II. 8. 48), as was taught by Trismegistus and the *Carmina Sibyllina*, as well as by the prophets (Hermes and the Sibyls are more important than philosophers for Lactantius). According to Hermes (*Epit.* 37. 2), this second god is God's *opifex*, or *demiourgos*, endowed by God the Father with extraordinary wisdom and might (*Div. instit.* IV. 6. 9). Plato, in teaching that there was a second god, might have been following Trismegistus (*Epit.* 37. 4).⁵⁶

Anthropology. Like the Old Testament, Trismegistus also teaches that man was created in the image of God (*Div. instit.* II. 10. 14, VII. 4. 3). In fact, Man is said to be the image of god and the image of the universe in the translation of the *Logos teleios*, the *Asclepius* (chaps 7–8, 10–11, 19), and in *CH* I. 12, v. 6. That most ancient of wise men taught with what great expertise God gave shape to the human body; that most ancient of doctrines was then also taken up by the Stoics and by Cicero.⁵⁷ The human body is composed of the four elements discovered by Empedocles, according to a Hermetic testimony incorporated by Lactantius (*Div. instit.* II. 12. 4). This is also similar to what is said in *Excerptum Stobaei* II. A. 2:

Concerning truth, my son Tat, it is not possible for one who is but a man to speak adequately; for man is an imperfect creature, composed of parts which are imperfect, and his mortal frame is made up of many alien bodies. But what it is within my power to say, that I do say, namely, that reality exists only in things everlasting. [...] The everlasting bodies, as they are in themselves — fire that is very fire, earth that is very earth, air that is very air, and water that is very water — these indeed are real. But our bodies are made up of all these elements together; they have in them something of fire, but also something of earth and water and air; and there is in them neither real fire nor real earth nor real water nor real air, nor anything that is real. (translation Scott, modified)

As Perrin has observed, the meaning of the Hermetic text is different from Lactantius's. The Hermetist wishes to demonstrate that the human body, since it is composite, does not have true elements in it, and thus that man has no access to

⁵⁵ See Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*, pp. 149–51.

⁵⁶ The passage of Plato is not easily identifiable. According to Wlosok, *Laktanz*, p. 253, it is *Timaeus* 37c; M. Perrin (*L'Homme antique et chrétien: l'anthropologie de Lactance*, 250–325 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1981), pp. 216–19) discusses the possibility; Löw (*Hermes Trismegistos*, p. 126 n. 430) is also uncertain.

⁵⁷ Actually, it was a common doctrine in Stoicism and in the culture of the imperial period, adopted, but not exclusively taught, by Hermetism. Lactantius says (*Div. instit.* II. 10. 15) that he had previously written the *De opificio Dei* to explain God's wondrous art in creating the human body.

truth: only a revelation can provide him with an explanation of the world. Lactantius, on the other hand, wishes to demonstrate that the four elements of the body are essentially reduced to two, heat and cold. This anthropological dualism corresponds to cosmological dualism in what might be called an 'ascending spiritualization'.⁵⁸

God has endowed man, alone of all living beings, with erect stature, *status rectus*, so that he might search for his own origin and keep his eye on higher things, despising the baseness of his own body: 'This gaze of his is called "contemplation of god" (*theoptia*)⁵⁹ by Trismegistus, and rightly so too; in dumb creatures it is non-existent' (*Div. instit.* VII. 9. 11; translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified).⁶⁰

Status rectus consequently entails the moral obligation of contemplating the universe and of searching aloft for the highest good.⁶¹ In this consists man's dignity, a topic that will be received quite favourably in the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. *Divinae institutiones* VII. 13. 3 contains a quotation of an unknown Greek Hermetic text:

⁵⁸ Perrin, *L'Homme antique*, pp. 260–62; his opinion is also followed by Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*, pp. 157–60.

⁵⁹ The concept of a 'god-contemplating power' is found in *Exc. Stob.* VII. 3, whereas Iamblichus (*On the Mysteries* VIII. 6) speaks of the 'god-contemplating soul' (Wlosok, *Laktanz*, p. 134 n. 55). The word *theoptia* is a conjecture of Fritzsche, but it is corroborated by similar expressions found in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (Laktanz, *Divinae Institutiones*, Book VII, intro., text, trans., and comm. by Freund, pp. 342–43). See also note 60.

⁶⁰ This conception has a strong Hermetic meaning; see Wlosok, *Laktanz*, p. 116 n. 7, and Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo', pp. 245–46. To my mind the Hermetic meaning of this conception is certain, although it has been doubted by some scholars.

⁶¹ This subject has been fully discussed by Wlosok, *Laktanz*, pp. 116–18, 133–34, 206–10; Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo', p. 233; and M. Pellegrino, 'Il topos dello "status rectus" nel contesto filosofico e biblico (a proposito di *Ad Diognetum* 10. 1–2)', in *Mullus: Festschrift Th. Klauser*, Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband, 1 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1964), pp. 273–81. Wlosok, *Laktanz*, p. 210, however, argues that Hermetism is not interested in man, although she recognizes that this is a Hermetic testimony. Perrin, *L'Homme antique*, pp. 68–87, therefore thinks that this conception is part of the Roman philosophical tradition, from Sallust and Cicero, and not of Hermetism. Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*, p. 184, considers it to be Hermetic, but he thinks that Lactantius does not interpret Cicero according to Hermetic doctrines but, vice versa, interprets the Hermetic concept in a Ciceronian-Christian manner. This is all true, but the fact remains that Lactantius thinks that this doctrine is corroborated by Hermes, and he also uses a typically Hermetic word like *theoptia* (*Exc. Stob.* II. A. 6 reads *theoptike dynamis*). This doctrine will be discussed again with regard to the Hermetic treatise *Asclepius* (pp. 70–71).

The same power created the nature of man to be one nature composed from two natures, the immortal and the mortal, making the same creature partly immortal and partly mortal, and he set him up midway between the divine and immortal nature and the mortal and mutable, so that he could see everything and admire it all. (translation Bowen and Garnsey)

Man, being composed of material and mutable as well as divine and immortal elements, occupies a place at the centre of the universe. His nature, then, has an intermediate position, for he must 'see everything and admire it all'. The doctrine of man's intermediate position and of his duty to watch over and rule the whole created world is also maintained by the *Asclepius* (chaps 6–9) and in *CH* IV. 2 and XIV. 4.⁶²

But in the mass of humanity, the person chosen by God, the one whose knowledge and reverence (*pietas*) distinguishes him from all others, is the gnostic (*Div. instit.* V. 14. 9–12). Reverence consists in the knowledge of God (II. 15. 6); gnosis, of course, is reserved to the very few (I. 11. 61; *Epit.* 14. 2–4) (see above, p. 18).

Demonology. Lactantius lays out Christian demonology in *Divinae Institutiones* II. 14. 1–6. When the number of men on earth grew, God, fearing that they might fall into the traps of the devil (who had initially been given power over the whole world), sent angels to help them. The devil tricked the angels into sinning as he had; they were driven from heaven and became devils and slaves of the devil on earth. They joined with women and generated other angels who cannot, strictly speaking, be considered either angels or men, but who had an intermediate (*media*) nature.⁶³ And therefore their lord is also called 'prince of the demons' (*daemoniarches*) by Trismegistus (*Div. instit.* II. 14. 6). This passage could be traced to the *Logos teleios*, since *Asclepius* 28 speaks of a *summus daemon* who oversees the punishments of men; *summus daemon* could be equivalent to *daemoniarches*,⁶⁴ although the Hermetic demon is obviously not the Christian demon.

The Coptic translation (*Ascl.* 21–29, *NH* VI. 7. 76. 22–33) is similar:

Listen, Asclepius! There is a great demon. The great God has appointed him to be overseer or judge over the souls of men. And God has placed him in the middle of the air between the earth and heaven. Now, when the soul comes forth from (the) body, it is necessary that

⁶² As has been observed by Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, p. 206 n. 67. See Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, I, 15 n. 85.

⁶³ This doctrine of the intermediate position of angels (or of demons, which are the same thing) was inspired by Platonism and was widely diffused in Late Antiquity.

⁶⁴ See the two passages of John the Lydian (pp. 25–26).

it meets this daimon. Immediately he (the daimon) will surround this one, and he will examine him in regard to the character that he has developed in his life.⁶⁵

The Logos teleios as a source for Lactantius. One Hermetic treatise, the *Logos teleios*, has come down to us in full in its Latin translation, the *Asclepius*.⁶⁶ Lactantius, however, does not use the *Asclepius*, which was very likely composed later and was thus unknown to him; instead he personally translates the Greek text. The *Logos teleios* had great significance for him, for it provided corroboration for many important Christian doctrines. Its reputation was probably due to the fact that, judging from its Latin translation, it was the longest and most complex Hermetic writing, and it was the most complete and most exhaustive for whoever wanted to learn, and put into practice, the doctrine of Trismegistus.

Lactantius finds corroboration for his demonology in the *Logos teleios* (*Div. instit.* II. 15. 7–8):⁶⁷

His disciple Asclepius has also explained the idea at greater length in that *Perfect Discourse* which he wrote to the king. They each declare ‘Demons are enemies and tormentors of men’, which is why Trismegistus calls them ‘wicked angels’; he was well aware that they turned into earthly creatures upon corruption of their celestial nature.⁶⁸ (translation Bowen and Garnsey)

Demons are considered evil, without further consideration, by the Christian Lactantius, whereas the Greek text specifies (logically) that the angels who are enemies of men are wicked angels (*angelous ponerous*). Indeed, for pagans ‘angel’ has a neutral value. This doctrine of angels is found again in *CH* IX. 3 and XVI. 10. 13; their wickedness is mentioned in XVI. 14.

⁶⁵ English translation of James Brashler, Peter A. Dirkse, and Douglas M. Parrott in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 337.

⁶⁶ Further details on pp. 49–51.

⁶⁷ This is my view, but Scott (*Hermetica*, p. 435), Mahé (*Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 239), and Löw (*Hermes Trismegistos*, p. 169), based on the words ‘which he wrote to the king’, think that Lactantius is referring to *CH* XVI. 15 (whose title is ‘Asclepius’ definitions to King Ammon). But how to explain the fact that Lactantius speaks of a *sermo perfectus*? According to Scott this is an error on Lactantius’s part.

⁶⁸ ‘Asclepius quoque auditor eius [scl. Hermetis] eandem sententiam latius explicavit in illo *Sermone perfecto* quem scripsit ad regem. Uterque vero daemones esse adfirmat inimicos et vexatores hominum, quos ideo Trismegistus *angelous ponerous* appellat; adeo non ignoravit ex caelestibus depravatos terrenos esse coepisse.’

Lactantius even finds in the *Logos teleios* corroboration for theology. In *Divinae Institutiones* IV. 6. 4 he quotes (in the original Greek) a passage of notable importance, which he says is taken from the *Logos teleios*.⁶⁹

The lord and maker of all things, whom we usually call God, created the second God visible and sensible (when I say sensible, I do not mean it actively — whether he has sensations or not will be dealt with later — but that God submitted him to perception and sight⁷⁰); when he had created him as his first and unique creation, and thought him fine and full of all good, he loved and cherished him as his own son. (translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified)

This is another witness (in addition to *Div. instit.* IV. 7. 3, which we saw above) to the fact that, according to Lactantius, Hermes also professed the doctrine of the Son of God. Siniscalco has observed that Lactantius understands the words of the Hermetic text in a Christian sense, identifying the ‘second god, visible and sensible’ with the Son of God,⁷¹ whereas for the Hermetic author the second god is the world. And a little later (IV. 6. 9),⁷² after having attributed to the Son of God the construction of the world as described in Proverbs 8. 22–31, Lactantius states:

Trismegistus calls him ‘God’s craftsman’ and the Sybil calls him ‘God’s adviser’ because he was given all that wisdom and virtue by God his father so that God could use his counsel and his handiwork in the making of the world.⁷³ (translation Bowen and Garnsey)

Compare also *Epitome* 37. 2: ‘By means of this craftsman, as Hermes says, and adviser, as the Sibyl says, the magnificent and marvelous construction of this world was brought about’.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Lactantius himself gives the Latin translation in *Epit.* 37. 5.

⁷⁰ The Greek text in this sentence is corrupt, although its sense can be discerned easily enough; all the editors substantially agree.

⁷¹ P. Siniscalco, ‘Ermete Trismegisto profeta pagano della rivelazione cristiana: la fortuna di un passo ermetico (*Ascl.* 8) nell’interpretazione di scrittori cristiani’, *Atti dell’Accademia delle Scienze di Torino*, 101 (1966–67), 83–117, (pp. 89–90); and also Scott, *Hermetica*, III, 46–49; Scott, *Hermetica*, ed. by Ferguson, IV, 15–20; Moersch, *Dall’Asclepius al Crater Hermetis*, p. 39; S. Gersh, *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), I, 370–73; *Das Corpus Hermeticum Deutsch: Übersetzung, Darstellung und Kommentierung*, vol. I: *Die griechischen Traktate und der lateinische ‘Asclepius’*, ed. by C. Colpe and J. Holzhausen, *Clavis Pansophiae*, 7. 1 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1997), p. 263 n. 83; p. 290 n. 156.

⁷² See also *Epit.* 37. 2, 4–5; Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*, pp. 201–03.

⁷³ ‘Idcirco illum Trismegistus *demiourgon tou theou* et Sibylla *symbolon* appellat, quod tanta sapientia et virtute sit instructus a deo patre, ut consilio eius et manibus uteretur in fabricatione mundi.’

⁷⁴ ‘Hoc opifice, ut Hermes ait, et consiliatore, ut Sibylla, praeclaram et mirabilem huius mundi fabricam machinatus est.’

The passage is certainly ambiguous: by saying ‘God’s craftsman’, Hermes probably meant that god is the creator of the second god, that is, the world, whereas Lactantius understands *demiourgon tou theou* as ‘the creator *that belongs to God*’. The same definition crops up in *Divinae Institutiones* VII. 18, where the *Logos teleios* is again quoted (18. 4): ‘the Lord and Father and God and creator of the first and only God’ (translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified). Here, too, both the Greek text and the corresponding passage of the *Asclepius* (chap. 26: ‘ille dominus et pater deus primipotens et unius gubernator dei’) mean the highest god, who is unique and rules the world. This latter god (the world), of whom the highest god is *gubernator*, is ‘one’ and unique, since other gods come after it, as is more fully explained in the *Asclepius*.⁷⁵ *Gubernator* is not found in the text of the *Logos teleios* and might be an addition of the Latin translator (i.e. the author of the *Asclepius*).

The *Logos teleios* contained a famous apocalypse, described in the *Asclepius* and in the Coptic translation. Lactantius also knows it. In *Divinae Institutiones* VII. 14–18 he describes the future end of the world, which will take place six thousand years after its creation and will happen in the midst of unutterable disasters and sufferings. This is not necessarily a Hermetic *testimonium*, as it could also have arisen in the Jewish context, as Ferguson thinks.⁷⁶ Nevertheless it contains certain peculiarities that indicate that it is one. For example, its reference to the future sufferings of Egypt (see *Div. instit.* VII. 15. 10–13) calls to mind a similar description in the *Asclepius* (chaps 24–27). Furthermore, in *Epitome* 66. 6 and 68. 1, Lactantius does not quote a precise Hermetic text to corroborate his doctrine of the end of the world, but he does say that the world’s old age and end were foretold by Trismegistus, Hystaspes, and the Sibyls. A quotation (in Greek) from the *Logos teleios* is used to corroborate the doctrine of the Christian apocalypse in *Divinae Institutiones* VII. 18. 4 (= *Ascl.* 26):

When this happens, my dear Asclepius, then the Lord and Father and God and creator of the first and only God will look upon events and will defy disorder with his own will, which is goodness; he will put an end to error and will purify evil, partly by drenching it in water, partly by burning it with keen fire and sometimes by striking it with war and plague,

⁷⁵ Löw, *Hermes Trismegistos*, pp. 228–29, offers a different explanation, namely that the words ‘of the first and unique god’ constitute a subjective genitive, i.e. ‘a reference to god the father, according to whose will and on whose behalf the second god works as a craftsman’. This interpretation is unclear to me.

⁷⁶ *Hermetica*, IV, ed. by Ferguson, pp. x–xvi. In their edition of Lactantius, Heck and Wlosok consider these words to be an allusion to the *Oracula Sibyllina*.

and he will restore⁷⁷ and re-establish his own world. (translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified)

Lactantius also quotes the prayer (= *Ascl.* 41) (*Div. instit.* VI. 25. 10–12), emphasizing only the statements that insist on the intimate and personal aspect of addressing God, as distinguished from exterior practices, such as burning incense, and from particular pagan rites. Lactantius approves of the Hermetic prayer's interiority: 'and quite right too. God should be made sacrifice by word, since God is the Word, as he himself has declared' (translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified).⁷⁸

Lactantius introduces this prayer of the *Logos teleios* with another Hermetic statement, a quotation of *CH* XII. 23 that he himself translated into Latin (*Div. instit.* VI. 25. 10): 'adore this word, my son, and worship it. There is only one worship of God, not to be evil' (translation Bowen and Garnsey, modified).⁷⁹ The 'word', then, is the Word of God.

In conclusion, already in Lactantius the *Logos teleios* begins to take on the importance that it will have for the entire arc of Latin Christian culture, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, thanks in part to its translation into Latin. Beginning with Ficino's translation, the *Asclepius*, on the one hand, and the *Pimander* (i.e. the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum*), on the other, are considered the two principle witnesses of *prisca sapientia*.

Conclusions

Although critical of philosophy (including that of Plato), which he considered *a falsa sapientia*,⁸⁰ Lactantius is nevertheless favourably disposed to the revelations of the *Oracula Sibyllina* and Hermes, which he sees as forerunners of Christianity. For this reason he makes abundant use of the Hermetic texts. In the Age of Constantine the reader of middling culture must have been better acquainted with Hermes' theosophy than with the writings of the Greek philosophers. That is why Lactantius draws on him so frequently. No doubt he is convinced that he can find answers nearly as satisfying as those provided by the Christian religion. Some of Lactantius's Christian doctrines — such as that of God, in which Trinitarian

⁷⁷ *Egagen*: the past tense in an Egyptian prediction simply means that the event had already happened, not that it has to come in the future.

⁷⁸ 'Et recte. Verbo enim sacrificari oportet Deo, siquidem Deus verbum est, ut ipse confessus est'; see John I. 1.

⁷⁹ 'Hoc verbum, o fili, adora et cole. Cultus autem Dei unus est, malum non esse.'

⁸⁰ This is the title of the third book of the *Divinae institutiones*.

theology plays a rather modest role; ethics, with the doctrine of gnosis and the dignity of man; cosmology; demonology; and eschatology — can be traced with few adjustments of meaning or perhaps even intentional misunderstandings, with modest omissions or additions of apparently little importance, either to Christianity or to Hermetism. In Lactantius we see a form of culture in which Christianity is tacked on to all the traditional elements of pagan origin. At this point, however, it is important to observe that not only for Lactantius, but also for other Christian writers before him, the only kind of Hermetism that is considered valid is philosophical Hermetism. Theosophies are the pagan counterpart of the Christian religion in his eyes, since they contain the *sine qua non* of wisdom: a revealed truth. Christianity, however, is the revelation of a full and absolute truth, whereas Hermetism was the revelation of an ancient but partial truth; pagans could not have gotten any closer. But why turn to the Hermetic writings?

Lactantius's attitude towards the culture of his time has been the object of recent studies. Elizabeth De Palma Digeser, although not always precise in her exegesis of the Hermetic texts and those of Lactantius, has nevertheless proposed a convincing solution with the phrase 'an inclusive Christianity'.⁸¹ Whereas earlier scholarship saw Lactantius as essentially passive in his use of pagan culture, she has argued that Hermetic theosophy served as a vehicle for presenting readers with a form of Christianity whose theology accommodated 'educated Christians and philosophical monotheists'⁸² and was compatible with the beliefs and rites of late antique philosophical monotheism in Rome. Thus, Lactantius also included Hermetism in his Christian *Weltanschauung*. His philosophy might have been a reply to Porphyry — whom modern scholars tend to see everywhere in the culture of the Age of the Tetrarchs and Constantine.

The diffusion of Lactantius's works in fifteenth-century Italy, where they were among the first to be printed, was probably another factor, along with Ficino's translation, in facilitating the diffusion of Hermetism. The great favour that Hermetism enjoyed among scholars of the age, who also considered themselves Christians and wanted to be considered such, was prepared earlier by Lactantius's attitude. The world and the mentality of Tertullian seem quite far off.

⁸¹ De Palma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, pp. 84–90. It is obvious that Lactantius does not represent a true form of 'Hermetized Christianity' (thus Walter, *Pagane Texte*, p. 170); his attitude towards pagan culture is standard for all Christian writers.

⁸² De Palma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire*, p. 90. Although it would more precise to speak of 'henotheists.'

Philastrius

After the syncretism of the age of Constantine and Lactantius, the climate changes. During the fourth century AD Christians have a sense of themselves as victors, and they are less apt to scour pagan theosophy for forecasts of their own truth. Hermes is even considered a Christian heretic by one incontestably mediocre writer, Philastrius of Brescia. Philastrius's knowledge of Hermetism (*Diversarum hereseon liber* 10. 8, 103. 1, 113. 1) is slight and, because information is lacking, unclear. It seems that he does not know the true religion of Hermes, and by Hermetism he understands a theosophy in Gaul that engaged in sun worship and whose origin could be traced to Egypt. Despite the poverty of this information, one could think that Philastrius had some kind of vague knowledge of Hermetists' interest in astrology, similar to what induced his contemporary Marius Victorinus to mention that the technique of dividing the hours of the day was contrived by Hermes the Egyptian (*Explanatio in Ciceronis Rhetoricam* 1. 26, a work of Victorinus predating his conversion). Nevertheless, Philastrius has no idea of the function of Hermetism in Christian dogma.

The *Asclepius*

At some point in the fourth century after Lactantius, the *Logos teleios* (whose importance has already been mentioned) was translated into Latin under the name *Asclepius* and preserved anonymously among the philosophical works of Apuleius. It was, however, not considered an authentic work of Apuleius in Antiquity. Augustine, who confutes it (as we shall see), attributes it to 'Hermes the Egyptian, whom they call Trismegistus' (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 23). Not even the medieval manuscripts attribute it to Apuleius. As has been seen, Lactantius quotes passages from the *Logos teleios* whose content corresponds to the *Asclepius*. But the text is different, and it follows that the *Asclepius* is posterior to Lactantius, as it is improbable that a Latin translation of the *Logos teleios* existed but that Lactantius either did not know it or did not make use of it.

The *Logos teleios* was probably written in the third century, although it is difficult to hypothesize a more precise date. Its so-called 'apocalypse', which is found in the *Asclepius* (chaps 24–26) and partly in Lactantius (*Div. instit.* VII. 14–18), foresees the end of the sacred rites of the Egyptian religion — as a consequence of the prohibition, imposed by impious men, on preserving the cults of the ancestors — and its substitution by the cult of the dead. This impiety will arise when the world comes to its end, as men's wickedness will have reached its peak; then god

will bring about palingenesis. Therefore some scholars date the *Logos teleios* to a time shortly before Lactantius. Others, because chap. 24 of the *Asclepius* foresees an invasion of Egypt by barbarian peoples, such as Scythians or Indians, have hypothesized that the *Logos teleios* was composed in a period after the Jewish revolt. They date it to the time of Trajan (AD 112), during which Egypt was ravaged by the Jews who, of course, were considered foreigners by the Egyptians. Still others have proposed for the same reason the invasions of the Palmyrenes, who arrived in the years after the death of Emperor Gallienus (AD 268).

Regarding the *Asclepius*, some scholars think that its author, in speaking about the end in store for the extremely ancient Egyptian religion, is referring to the laws promulgated by Emperor Constantius II between 346 and 353, whose aim was to repress pagan cults and impose Christianity. According to Mahé and Fowden, however, the apocalypse is a text belonging to a long tradition typical of Egyptian culture⁸³ and to a precise genre of apocalypse literature that was cultivated there.⁸⁴ The prophecy is then obviously Egyptian in its content and its character, but it bears no relation to any actual events that threatened Egyptian religion. It is Christian writers like Lactantius and Augustine who, in the interest of their own apologetics, would go on to interpret it as Hermes' prediction of Christianity's rise in the place of idol worship, and thus as a prophecy *ex eventu*.

The translation was probably composed in Africa. Carcopino supposed he could link the thought of the majority of the Christian writers of that region back to Hermetic doctrines.⁸⁵ Mahé observes that Augustine, before polemicizing against the Platonists Plotinus and Porphyry, deals with the Africans, namely Apuleius and the *Asclepius*.⁸⁶ Fowden is of the same opinion.⁸⁷

The *Asclepius* is a thoroughly pagan work. This can be seen in certain of its Egyptian religious conceptions, according to which (chap. 37) the ancestors of Hermes and Asclepius managed to invent the art of 'constructing gods' by means

⁸³ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 232–45; Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 38–43. Fowden's considerations, whose aim is to keep the *Asclepius* from slipping into the fourth century, have been taken up by V. Huninck, 'Apuleius and the "Asclepius"', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 50 (1996), 288–308 (pp. 291–92), with the intention of attributing the Latin text to Apuleius.

⁸⁴ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 72–81; J. P. Mahé, 'Le Fragment du *Discours parfait* dans la bibliothèque de Nag Hammadi', in *Colloque International sur les textes de Nag Hammadi, Québec, 22–25 août 1978*, ed. by B. Barc (Leuven: Peeters, 1981), pp. 304–27 (p. 311).

⁸⁵ Carcopino, *Aspects mystiques*, pp. 286–301.

⁸⁶ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 56–58.

⁸⁷ Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 38–42.

of putting them into statues, which thus became animated. Derchain has pointed out that in Egyptian religion statues are animated because the god himself lives in them.⁸⁸ According to Mahé, the Hermetic author thus follows Egyptian religion and believes that statues can be animated through theurgy.⁸⁹ This idea piques Augustine's ire and will cause Renaissance Hermetists no little embarrassment.⁹⁰ The *Asclepius* also contains hostile references to Christianity (like the cult of the dead, against which chap. 24 polemicizes; the allusion to those killed by violence in chap. 29, which could refer to Christian martyrs, whose sacrifice would thus be equated with the violent death of any person at all).

We shall devote sustained attention to the *Asclepius* despite its obvious pagan character. For Christian thought (with the sole exception of Augustine) considered it an important text of Hermetic revelation to be drawn on and grappled with.

Literary Aspects of the Asclepius

A comparison between the *Logos teleios* and the *Asclepius* would be very interesting both for highlighting the differences between the two works and for understanding the method of the Latin translation. Such is difficult, however, since a good part of Lactantius's quotations are not in the original Greek but in Latin, translated by the author himself.⁹¹ Nevertheless, something can be drawn from a comparison of the final prayer of the *Asclepius* (chap. 41) with a similar prayer in Greek that has come down to us in a papyrus on magic (*Papyrus Mimaute XVIII*), as well as with the Coptic translation of *The Prayer of Thanksgiving* (NH VI. 7. 63. 33–65. 7).⁹² There is also a longer section of the *Asclepius* (chaps 21–29),

⁸⁸ Ph. Derchain, 'L'Authenticité de l'inspiration égyptien dans le "Corpus Hermeticum"', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 161 (1962), 175–98 (pp. 161, 188).

⁸⁹ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 98–100.

⁹⁰ See below, pp. 146–50.

⁹¹ An insightful overview of the literary aspects of this work is provided by B. Rochette, 'Un cas peu connu de traduction du grec en latin: l'"Asclepius" du *Corpus Hermeticum*', *Cahiers Glotz*, 14 (2003), 67–96.

⁹² *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, ed. by K. Preisendanz, vol. I (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1928), pp. 56–58. A good introduction to the Greek work is also found in vol. II of *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. by Nock and trans. by Festugière, pp. 259–95. The two parallel texts, that is, the Greek one of the papyrus and the Latin one of the *Asclepius*, have been studied by R. Reitzenstein, 'Zum *Asclepius* des Pseudo-Apuleius', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 7 (1904), 393–411; Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, pp. 285–87; the comparison with the Coptic text and the problem of Hermetism's origin has been posed by J.-P. Mahé, 'La Prière

that is, the above-mentioned ‘apocalypse’, that has a parallel in a Coptic text, it too a translation of the original Greek (*NH* VI. 8. 65. 15–78. 43). This section has been published and amply commented upon by Mahé,⁹³ but, since it is also a translation, it is difficult to make a proper comparison with the Greek original (which can only be hypothesized). According to Mahé, the Coptic translation is more faithful than the Latin one to the original Greek, and logically so, since the common practice of Latin translations is always to render the original in an ‘artistic’ way.

Table 1 contains a comparison of chapter 41 of the Latin *Asclepius* with the Greek and Coptic texts (both given in English translation).

The subject requires a solemn and elevated style, and therefore the author often employs phrases and expressions of a gravity and majesty suited to catechesis. The same can be perceived throughout the *Asclepius*. Such are the phrases: *audi Asclepi* (chaps 8 and 28) or *audi itaque* (chap. 22). There are also exhortations to listen attentively and to learn a lesson of great importance: ‘rationem vero tractatus istius, o Asclepi, non solum sagaci intentione, verum etiam cupio te animi vivacitate percipere’ (chap. 10). These exhortations are often expressed with the future imperative, which at the time of the *Asclepius* (fourth century AD) was archaic and thus had a purely literary value: ‘hoc ergo omni vero verius manifestiusque mente *percipito*’ (chap. 21); ‘nunc mihi *adesto* totus, quantum mente vales, quantum calles astutia’ (chap. 3); ‘huius itaque, qui est unus omnia, vel ipse est creator omnium, in tota hac disputatione *curato* meminisse’ (chap. 2). The ‘perfect discourse’ of the Greek original has become a *sermo religiosus* (chaps 1 and 32), a *sanctissimus sermo* (chap. 23).

The vocabulary also tends towards a strongly religious stylization. This is the case with certain archaisms, which in Latin are always a sign of stylistic solemnity and are much more meaningful in the prose of the fourth century.⁹⁴ Let us cite a few cases:

d’action de grâces du codex VI de Nag-Hammadi et le Discours parfait’, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 13 (1974), 40–60; Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, I, 137–41, 145–46; see also P. A. Carozzi, ‘Hoc lumine salvati tuo (*Asclepius* 41) ...’, in *Perennitas: Studi in onore di A. Brelich* (Rome: Bretschneider, 1980), pp. 115–38.

⁹³ The Coptic text is commented upon by Mahé both in *Hermès en Haute-Égypte* and in *Le Fragment du Discours parfait*. Here we follow the English translation of Brashler, Dirkse, and Parrott in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, p. 329.

⁹⁴ Other elements of fourth-century language in the *Asclepius* have been identified by M. T. Horsfall Scotti, ‘Apuleio tra magia e filosofia: la riscoperta di Agostino’, in *Dicti studiosus: Scritti di filologia offerti a Scevola Mariotti dai suoi allievi* (Urbino: Quattro Venti, 1990), pp. 297–320 (p. 314 nn. 77–78); Huninck, who tries to attribute it to Apuleius, is not convincing (‘Apuleius and the “Asclepius”’, pp. 292–93).

‘divinus Cupido’⁹⁵ *sic est orsus dicere*, and a little later, ‘praeter Hammona nullum vocassis alium’ (chap. 1); in the apocalypse of chaps 24–26: ‘futurum tempus est, cum adpareat Aegyptios *incassum* pia mente divinitatem sedula religione servasse [...] terraque, sedes religionum quae fuit, *viduata* numinum praesentia destituetur’ (chap. 24); the use of the verb *pandere* for revealing a mystery (chap. 19), as used by Lucretius, Virgil, and Manilius; the etymological figures *nomine nuncupari* (chap. 10), *munde mundo servando* (chap. 11), *munere munerando* (chap. 11), *illuvione diluens* (chap. 26), *luminasti lumine* (chap. 32).

On the other hand, Lactantius’s quotations and his judgement of the *Logos teleios* do not seem to me to indicate a marked religious colouring in the Greek original.

Ultimately, as Rochette observes, the translator is a good Latinist who knows Virgil and Ovid and is comfortable with the philosophical language of Cicero.⁹⁶ Rochette also notes that translating is never a banal activity, a fortiori when it comes to the translation of esoteric writings. He himself has carried out a particularly interesting study, undertaking a literary comparison of passages of the Latin translation with Greek originals that have been preserved as fragments (Lactantius, *Div. instit.* IV. 6. 4 and Pseudo-Anthymus, or Marcellus of Ancyra = *Ascl.* 8; John the Lydian, *De mens.* IV. 7 = chap. 19; Lactantius, *Div. instit.* VII. 18. 3–4 = chap. 26; Stobaeus V, Hense, p. 1087 = chap. 27; John the Lydian, *De mens.* IV. 14 and 32 = chap. 28; Lactantius, *Div. instit.* II. 15. 6 = chap. 29; John the Lydian, *De mens.* IV. 14 and 32 = chap. 28; Lactantius, *Div. instit.* II. 15. 6 = chap. 29; John the Lydian, *De mens.* IV. 7 = chap. 39; *Papyrus Mimaut* = chap. 41).⁹⁷

In conclusion, we can say that the *Asclepius* constitutes a literary genre — theological treatise–*cum*-revelation — without parallel in the Latin context. Gnosis, the novelty of philosophical Hermetism, found the most apt vehicle of expression in the literary form of the *Asclepius*.

⁹⁵ This name is used to indicate Hermes himself, but for what reason Hermes Trismegistus is here (and only here in all the Hermetic texts) called *Cupido* has not yet been explained. The text might be corrupt.

⁹⁶ Rochette, ‘Un cas peu connu’, p. 92.

⁹⁷ Rochette, ‘Un cas peu connu’, pp. 72–90.

Table 1.

<i>Asclepius</i>	<i>Papyrus Mimaut</i> XVIII, n. 2931	<i>Nag Hammadi</i> , cod. VI. 7
Gratias tibi summe, exsuperantissime; tua enim gratia tantum sumus cognitionis tuae lumen consecuti, nomen sanctum et honorandum, nomen unum, quo solus deus est benedicendus religione paterna, quoniam omnibus paternam pietatem et religionem et amorem et quaecumque est dulcior efficacia, praebere dignaris condonans nos sensu, ratione, intelligentia: sensu, ut te cognoverimus; ratione, ut te suspicionibus indagemus; cognitione, ut te cognoscentes gaudeamus. Ac (hoc <i>al.</i>) numine salvati tuo gaudemus, quod te nobis ostenderit totum; gaudemus, quod nos in corporibus situs aeternitati fueris consecrare dignatus. Haec est enim humana	We give you thanks, with our whole soul and with our whole heart facing you, name unutterable, honoured with the title of 'god', and blessed with the holiness [hosiotei <i>add.</i> Preisendanz] of god, for you have shown to all men and women [pasas <i>corr.</i> Reitzenstein] paternal benevolence and love and friendship and the sweetest regard (<i>energeia</i>), giving us <i>nous</i>, logos, and gnosis: <i>nous</i>, so that we might think of you, logos, so that we might invoke you, gnosis, so that we might know you. We rejoice, for you have shown yourself to us; we rejoice, for with your gnosis you have made gods of us who were in a created body. The only way for man to thank you is to know you. And we know you, oh life of human life; we know you, oh womb of all gnosis; we know you, oh womb fertile with the generation of the Father; we know you, oh eternal permanence of the Father heavy with the child of life. And worshipping this gift of His, we have requested no favour from you but that you wish to preserve us in the	We give thanks to You! Every soul and heart is lifted up to You, undisturbed name, honoured with the name 'God' and praised with the name 'Father', for to everyone and everything (comes) the fatherly kindness and affection and love, and any teaching there may be that is sweet and plain, giving us mind, speech, and knowledge: mind, so that we may understand You, speech, so that we may expound You, knowledge, so that we may know You. We rejoice, having been illuminated by Your knowledge. We rejoice, because you have shown us Yourself. We rejoice, because while we were in the body, You have made us divine through Your knowledge. The thanksgiving of the man who attains you is one thing: that we know You. We have known You, intellectual light. Life of Life, we have known you. Womb of every creature, we have known you. Womb pregnant with the nature of the Father, we have known You. Eternal permanence of the begetting Father, thus have we worshipped

sola gratulatio: cognitio maiestatis tuae. Cognovimus te et [o <i>conicit</i> Scott] lumen maximum solo intellectu sensibile; intellegimus te, o vitae vera vita, o naturarum omnium fecunda praegnatio; cognovimus te [<i>del.</i> Reitzenstein], totius naturae tuo conceptu plenissimae <patris generantis <i>Koenen</i> > aeterna perseveratio. In omni enim ista oratione adorantes bonum bonitatis tuae hoc tantum deprecamur, ut nos velis servare perseverantes in amore cognitionis tuae et numquam ab hoc vitae genere separari. Haec optantes convertimus nos ad puram et sine animalibus cena.	knowledge of you [...] and that we not fail in living such a life.	Your goodness. There is one petition that we ask: we would be preserved in knowledge. And there is one protection that we desire: that we not stumble. When they had said these things in the prayer, they embraced each other and they went to eat their holy food, which has no blood in it.
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The Structure of the Asclepius

The 'disorder' that characterizes the structure of the Hermetic dialogue — disorder as defined by nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics — doubtlessly contrasts with the harmony of the Platonic dialogue. But this comparison is faulty. It is not a disorder resulting from lack of artistic skill but rather from the abandonment of logical structures of thought; this is what is required by theosophy, for which this type of dialogue is the proper tool. Revelation, bearer of gnosis and spiritual elevation, has no use for treatises or scholarly commentaries; it requires religious language and mystery.

Indeed, the norms that give structure to a text aimed at philosophical instruction are wholly overturned here. With no proem or introduction from which to draw anything that might have a direct connection to its author, the *Asclepius* presents us with a dialogue between Trismegistus and Asclepius, in addition to whom Ammon and Tat appear as silent characters.⁹⁸ This is also the case in the Greek Hermetic treatises. Repetitions are numerous, shifts between sections are sudden and without transition.⁹⁹ For this reason scholars divided the *Asclepius* into independent sections, which supposedly had been assembled by a vague 'editor' or 'compiler'.¹⁰⁰

Mahé, on the contrary, identified a central nucleus in the *Asclepius*, comprised of chaps 1–13, 20–27, and 37–38. He then hypothesized that an 'editor' (although in our view it would be better to speak of the author of the *Asclepius*, i.e. the translator of the *Logos teleios*) superimposed onto it a second Hermetic treatise, informed by a different philosophical conception from the first, and tried to harmonize their differences.¹⁰¹ Differences, however, remained in the text that we read, since the 'editor' or author was not a subtle enough philosopher.

⁹⁸ They are fixed characters in all the Hermetic treatises; this is one of the features of the *Asclepius*'s 'Egyptian' aspect.

⁹⁹ These are characteristics of Hermetic discourse that appear on a first reading. They have been described with regard to the *Asclepius* in my *Dall'Asclepius al'Crater Hermetis*, pp. 74–78.

¹⁰⁰ For the sake of brevity we mention only the names of recent scholars without summarizing their positions: see Th. Zielinski, 'Hermes und die Hermetik', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 8 (1905), 321–72, esp. pp. 369–70; W. Bousset, in his review of Kroll, *Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos*, *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeige*, 1914, 697–755, esp. pp. 750–51. A typical example of this procedure is W. Scott's commentary (*Hermetica*), which divided and reassembled the text of the *Asclepius*, making it extremely difficult to consult the commentary itself, which, for its part, contained valid observations.

¹⁰¹ J.-P. Mahé, 'Le Discours parfait d'après l'*Asclepius* latin: utilisation des sources et cohérence rédactionnelle', in *Colloque International sur les textes de Nag Hammadi*, ed. by Barc, pp. 405–34 (pp. 418–19).

But the problem of the work's internal coherence, once considered central, now seems secondary. For an awareness has been reached that the Hermetic writings (to say nothing of Hermetic teaching) are not systematic but a theosophy whose instrument of expression is revelation.¹⁰² Neither the *Asclepius* nor any other Hermetic treatise has a structure that accords with the designs outlined in treatises on rhetoric. Still, it is not necessary to hypothesize a compiler or editor, that is, someone who in theory wanted, but in practice was unable, to write in the manner demanded by the traditional norms of literary composition. The intention of the Hermetic texts is different from that of a philosophical treatise.¹⁰³ For they have to respond to the needs of a theosophy based on a revelation, which for its part preserved, in a new literary form and with unusual structures, the ancient Egyptian wisdom elaborated in the Hellenistic Age.¹⁰⁴ Wigtil has demonstrated that the Latin text — and this is especially apparent where it is possible to compare it with the Greek original — has a much stronger 'apocalyptic' or 'revelatory' character than the *Logos teleios*.¹⁰⁵ In any case the Latin translator has his own agenda and does not confine himself to translating the Greek text; instead he interprets and modifies it, in line with the customary norms of Latin literary translation.

The Hermetic mysterium

The content of the *Asclepius* and the aim of the translator can be indicated by one of the work's characteristic words: *mysterium*.¹⁰⁶ The *mysterium* of the *Asclepius* is emphasized several times in the course of the revelation, and naturally the characters are entreated to conceal it with a religious silence: 'magna tibi pando et

¹⁰² See Mahé, 'La Voie d'immortalité', p. 365.

¹⁰³ Fundamental for defining the typology of the Hermetic writings, in their combination of sentences, commentaries, myths, and prayers, is Mahé (*Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 407–36); this typology is concerned above all with their origin, but certain structural elements (e.g. the use of the sentence) can also be found in the *Asclepius*.

¹⁰⁴ Festugière's attempt, in line with his general interpretation of Hermetism, to trace the Hermetic treatises to the outline of the philosophical treatise of the Hellenistic schools, whose model was the Platonic dialogue (see Festugière, *Révélation*, II, 28–50), is therefore unconvincing.

¹⁰⁵ D. N. Wigtil, 'Incorrect Apocalyptic: The Hermetic "Asclepius" as an Improvement on the Greek Original', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. by Temporini and Haase, II. 17. 4, pp. 2282–97; Wigtil's conclusions are also accepted by Horsfall Scotti, 'Apuleio tra magia e filosofia', p. 316 n. 84.

¹⁰⁶ See Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, pp. 76 and 166.

divina nudo mysteria' (chap. 19); 'ex domino illo totius naturae deo hoc sit cunctis in aeternum procreandi inventum tributumque mysterium' (chap. 21); 'et vos, o Tat et Asclepi et Hammon, intra secreta pectoris divina mysteria silentio tegite et taciturnitate celate' (chap. 32). But its meaning is not religious *in a strict sense*; Hermetism is not a religion. Scott observes that the *mysterium* of the *Asclepius* is not that of a religious initiation but rather is reached by means of a dialogue between master and student.¹⁰⁷ The *Asclepius*, then, like the other Hermetic writings, would be the introduction to a philosophy, not to a mystery initiation. Therefore Scott interprets the title *Logos teleios*, the *sermo perfectus* of which Lactantius speaks, to mean the 'crowning discourse', the discourse that completes Hermetic teaching, in the sense that it documents Hermetism's most advanced teaching and represents the final stage of the pupil's education. It points the way to a doctrine reserved to those who are able to understand it and who, in order to be worthy, must exercise their own minds and prepare themselves by leading a pure life. It is, in sum, an esoteric doctrine.¹⁰⁸ We must distinguish, then. Hermetism is not a mystery religion with specific rites and initiations, but that does not make it a philosophy tout court. To eliminate all religious significance from the *Asclepius* would be to falsify its meaning. If it is true that *teleios* signifies a perfecting, such entails a gnosis that is exclusively a gift of god. Thus will the pupil be able to see god, to know him, and to join with him: 'But to you, supreme god, I give thanks for enlightening me with the light by which divinity can be seen' (chap. 32).

The final prayer gives the dialogue its meaning. Trismegistus and his disciples, by possessing knowledge, have been *numine salvati tuo*, and they beseech god to grant them perpetual love for it. In the *Asclepius*, as in Hermetism generally, the esoteric aspect is also quite strong. Gnosis is limited to a small number of individuals (see below, pp. 70–71), and consequently the true worshippers of the divinity are very few (a similar attitude is also found in certain intellectualist and

¹⁰⁷ Scott, *Hermetica*, III, 2. Mahé (*Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 48) also rejects Reitzenstein's interpretation and approaches that of Scott, understanding *teleios* as 'the most perfect, the most solemn of all its discourses' (see chap. 1: 'divino sermoni [...] qui merito omnium antea nobis factorum [...] videatur esse religiosa pietate divinior'), and he observes that there is no trace of initiation in the *Asclepius*. Nevertheless, I think my interpretation can withstand Mahé's objection, too.

¹⁰⁸ See Sfameni Gasparro, 'La gnosi ermetica'; P. A. Carozzi, 'Gnose et sotériologie dans la "Korè Kosmou" hermetique', in *Gnosticisme et monde hellénistique: Actes du colloque de Louvain-la-Neuve*, ed. by J. Ries, Y. Janssens, and J. M. Sevrin (Leuven: Peeters, 1982), pp. 6–78 (pp. 62–64). Ugo Bianchi correctly speaks of 'mysteriosophy': *Prometeo, Orfeo, Adamo* (Rome: Ateneo e Bizzarri, 1976), p. 60.

Gnostic forms of Christianity) (chap. 22). Such, then is the religion of the *Asclepius*, a religion that concerns only the intellect, a *religio mentis* (chap. 25).¹⁰⁹

The religious character of the *Asclepius* emerges not only from its content but also from the setting in which the dialogue takes place. The reconstruction of a religious atmosphere is one of the *Asclepius*'s most successful literary and artistic aspects. The dialogue is set in the *adytum* of a temple, and the final scene shows us four characters (Trismegistus, Asclepius, Tat, and Ammon) in the act of prayer. Once the lesson is over, the master and his disciples partake in a *pura et sine animalibus caena*, that is, a meal intended not for pleasure but to represent, in its choice of food, a life choice.

The Hermetism of the Asclepius and Christianity

Which Hermetic doctrines, when present in a pagan treatise, were able to meet with the approval of Christian readers? The next sections are dedicated to investigating the religious, philosophical, and ethical elements of the *Asclepius* that could make it acceptable — with certain caveats, of course — to Christian readers, as indeed happened in the following centuries.

God

The *Asclepius*, like the other Hermetic writings, contains an accentuated dualist conception, although it does not rule out a positive view of the world as the product of god's creative and ordering activity (see pp. 11–12).

In this philosophico-religious context, the work's religious terminology is also that common to the Latin culture of the Late Empire. For the author of the *Asclepius*, god is *summus* (chaps 16 and 32), 'seated atop the summit of the highest heaven' (chap. 27);¹¹⁰ he is *summus, exsuperantissimus*, as invoked in the final prayer (chap. 41). *Exsuperantissimus* had been used earlier by Apuleius (see *Plat.* I. 12. 205; *De mundo* 27. 350).¹¹¹ Has the translator consciously imitated Apuleius's style, borrowing a word that had a strong religious significance? According to Mahé, the term *exsuperantissimus* had lost its specificity by the time of the

¹⁰⁹ See Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, p. 292; Festugière, *Révélation*, IV, 241; Wlosok, *Laktanz*, pp. 121–29.

¹¹⁰ See *CH* IV. 5, XI. 19; *Exc. Stob.* XXI. 2 (Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 248).

¹¹¹ Here we might also mention the classic (although now outdated) study of F. Cumont, 'Jupiter summus exsuperantissimus', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 9 (1906), 323–36.

Asclepius and no longer had particular connotations.¹¹² But it surely connotes god's supreme transcendence, and thus it differs from the more usual *summus*.

Since he is absolutely transcendent, God eludes all human understanding (chaps 3, 31). Or, by way of a sort of contradiction that, however, is not without parallels in the Platonism of the time, he is *mente sola intellegibilis* (chap. 16). Similar to this contrast between the utter impossibility of knowing god and the intellectual knowledge of him attainable by humans is the contrast between god's being without name and at the same time possessing all names (chap. 20).¹¹³ If the first statement can be traced to a learned form of theology (it, too, Platonizing), the conviction that god possesses all possible names as a function of his infinity might belong to a more popular current. A well-known 'aretalogy' of Isis (i.e. a celebration of her powers) is found in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* (XI. 5), and it has an analogue in another aretalogy (*Oxyrhinchus Papyrus* XI. 1380).¹¹⁴ But the name of god, whatever it may be, is a sacred and honourable name, a unique name (chap. 41), venerated according to the religion that befits the father ('quo solus deus est benedicendus religione paterna'), precisely because god shows his fatherly *pietas*, *religio*, and love to all. The prayer at the end of the *Asclepius* continues, 'cognovimus te et lumen maximum solo intellectu sensibile': god is light, and the purely intellectual knowledge that one has of him is knowledge of a light.

Another of god's attributes more common than his supreme greatness and transcendence is his omnipotence. The *Asclepius* avoids the term 'omnipotent', although it was vouched for by a long classical tradition,¹¹⁵ preferring instead the neologism *primipotens*, 'first in power' (chap. 26). Perhaps the Latin translator wanted to avoid *omnipotens*, which in his times had become common especially in Christian theology and liturgy, and he thus emphasized the simpler *protos* of the *Logos teleios* instead.

¹¹² Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, I, 154–55.

¹¹³ This apparent contradiction between the two conceptions has been pointed out by Festugière, *Révélation*, IV, 70–78. It crops up, in the same period and in the same milieu as the *Asclepius*, in Tiberianus (vv. 5–6), as has been observed by T. Agozzino, 'Una preghiera gnostica pagana e lo stile lucreziano nel IV secolo', in *Dignam dis: a Giampaolo Vallot* (Venice: Libreria Universitaria Editrice, 1972), pp. 169–210 (pp. 175–77).

¹¹⁴ On these forms of Egyptian religious hymnology, see Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 45–52.

¹¹⁵ See for example Valerius Soranus, frag. 4; Vergilius, *Aeneid* II. 689, IV. 206, etc.; the phrase *pater omnipotens* is, as is known, common in Virgil; *omnipotens*, in the classical sense, is in Tiberianus, v. 1.

God's omnipotence is manifested in his making immediately real and existent that which was the object of his will (chap. 8). 'God's will has no beginning; it remains the same, everlasting in its present state. God's nature is deliberation; will is the supreme goodness', affirms the *Asclepius* (chap. 26). His omnipotence is manifested first of all in the creation of the world (chaps 2, 3, 8, 10, 20, 41, etc.), as can also be read in *CH* XIV. 4 and XVI. 3. 18. The *Asclepius*, however, does not have in mind a creation *ex nihilo*, as it posits the existence of original matter (chaps 7, 14, 17).¹¹⁶

Everything obeys god (chaps 7 and 19), who is *dominus* (chaps 8, 10)¹¹⁷ and father. The term recurs numerous times in the *Asclepius* (see chaps 9, 20, 23, 26, 29), as do both in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. God, because he is good, loves the world (chap. 11). The concept of divine goodness is certainly not new at the time of the *Asclepius*. It might even date back (to take one of the sources considered most authoritative for late antique speculation) to the famous definition of Plato's *Timaeus* (28c: 'he is good'), which was also taken up by various Christian writers. Moreover, the conviction that God is good is based on the affirmation of the Gospel (Mark 10. 18 and Luke 18. 19: 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone').

If God is good, he is still not the Good, not the *summum bonum* of the Neoplatonists. In this regard the Hermetic author moves in the realm of more popular ideas. He is not inclined to the abstraction of the philosophical schools. God's goodness is comprehensible to the mentality and the culture of the average man; it does not require a philosophical education. Similarly, in Christianity the most popular idea is that God is good, whereas in theology and philosophy it is that God is the *summum bonum*. The highest manifestation of god's goodness after the creation of the world is providence: god governs the world together with man (chaps 10, 16, 17, 26).

Proper to Hermetism is instead the conception of god as masculine and feminine (chaps 20–21), a claim that was taken up by Renaissance Christian Hermetism. Therefore god is *fecunda praegnatio* (chap. 41). This conception is also found in Tiberianus, v. 23: 'tu sexu plenus toto' ('you are full of all that is sex'); in Firmicus Maternus (*Math.* v. *prae*f. 3: 'Quicumque es deus [...] tu omnium pater

¹¹⁶ *Hermetica*, III, ed. by Scott, pp. 184, 192–93.

¹¹⁷ For Apuleius, too, the supreme greatness of the divinity was accompanied by his supreme rule, after the manner of the King of Persia, who exercised his power through a series of intermediaries (*De mundo* 27. 350).

pariter ac mater'), in Avienus (*Phaenomena* 26: 'sexu immixtus utroque', 'both sexes are joined in your nature'), and in Martianus Capella (II. 145).¹¹⁸

Of particular importance in the theology of the *Asclepius* is the doctrine of *aeternitas*. *Aeternitas* is the mind of the highest god, and it is the origin of all things. In a penetrating study of the equation of *aeternitas* with *aion* outside of Hermatism, Festugière observes that the augur M. Messala, consul in 53 BC, had identified *aion* with Janus (see John the Lydian, *De mens.* IV. 1; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I. 9. 14) and attributed to it the capacity of creating and ruling the universe.¹¹⁹ Actually, the identification of *aeternitas* with Janus is not entirely clear in the passage of Macrobius cited by Festugière, but it is in other Latin writers of Late Antiquity: in Avienus (*Phaen.* 27: 'atque aevi pariter gemini simul omnia lustrans'), which Soubiran understands as 'the god of the past and future', that is, of the two *aeva*, referring to Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I. 9. 4, 'bifrontem [scl. *Ianum*] putant quod et praeterita sciverit et futura providerit' ('They think that Janus is two-faced because he knows the past and foresees the future');¹²⁰ Ausonius, *Eclogarum liber* X. 2, 'Iane biffrons, spectas tempora bina simul' ('Two-faced Janus, you behold the past and future at the same time'); *Panegyrici Latini* III. 3, 'nam primum omnium, quidquid immortale est, stare nescit sempiternoque motu se servat aeternitas' ('for the first of all things, whatever is immortal, cannot stand still and eternity sustains itself with eternal movement'); XII. 10: 'gaudent profecto divina motu et iugi agitatione se vegetat aeternitas' ('certainly divine things enjoy motion, and eternity is alive with continuous movement'). The hypostasis of eternity is symbolized in the work of Claudian (*Phoenix* 37),¹²¹ where the phoenix stands for *aion*, that is, for time that renews itself with periodic change (vv. 101–10); this is said in particular in vv. 104–05: 'te saecula teste | cuncta revolvuntur' ('all the centuries are rolled back

¹¹⁸ Agozzino, 'Una preghiera gnostica', p. 184; L. Lenaz, 'Nota a Mart. Cap., II, 145 (*ut uterque sexus caelum posset ascendere*)', *Latomus*, 39 (1980), 726–35.

¹¹⁹ Festugière, *Revelation*, IV. 176–99, but earlier Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, p. 38. n. 3; 274–81; see also M. Zepf, 'Der Gott aion in der hellenistischen Theologie', *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 25 (1928), 225–44.

¹²⁰ Avienus, *Les Phénomènes d'Aratos*, ed. by J. Soubiran (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981), p. 179.

¹²¹ This hypothesis was put forward by R. Reitzenstein, *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (Bonn: Marcus & Weber, 1921), pp. 181–85; it is taken up by M. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 256 and n. 67; Claudii Claudiani, *Phoenix (carm. min. 27)*, ed. by M. L. Ricci, 2nd edn (Bari: Edipuglia, 1981), pp. 33 and 116. See C. Moreschini, 'Paganus pervicacissimus: religione e "filosofia" in Claudiano', in *Aetas Claudianea*, ed. by W.-W. Ehlers and others (Leipzig: Saur, 2004), pp. 57–77 (pp. 61–66).

under your watch'). Claudian makes use of the doctrine of *aion* at the end of his panegyric for Stilicho's second consulship. Its position of importance, at the end of an intensely encomiastic poem, increases its significance. Stilicho's times are those of the second golden age, which the Sun, in its role as the supreme god, has delayed for so many years (*De secundo consulatu Stilichonis* II. 424–57). Derchain had earlier drawn attention to these verses celebrating the consulship of Stilicho, with regard to the diffusion of the Egyptian doctrine of *Aion*.¹²² On the other hand, the god *Aion* was connected to the religion of Isis, as is attested by Plutarch (*De Iside et Osiride* 9. 354C); Athenagoras calls Isis the 'nature of *aion*' (*Legatio* 30), and Claudian's Egyptian origin should be kept in mind on this count. As Giovanni Casadio observes,

Aion's adventure [...] continues through the entire arc of Hellenism for over a millennium, from Homer to Nonnus of Panopolis. The story of this adventure has been recounted various times by philologists, philosophers, archaeologists, historians, and historians of religion. [...] Studying Aion entails a profound investigation of Greek and Latin literature, the history of ancient art, and the religious history of Greece, Rome, Egypt, Iran, and the Semitic world.¹²³

The function of *aeternitas* in the *Asclepius* is not entirely clear. The Hermetic author identifies *aeternitas* with god in a context in which a *sensibilis deus* is also introduced:

31. Therefore, god has always been stable, and eternity likewise has always stood along with him, holding within it a world that had not come to be, the one we correctly call sensible. This sensible world, which imitates eternity, was made in the image of that god. Though it always stirs, time in its own way still has the power and character of stability by the very necessity of recurring upon itself. Thus, although eternity is stable, immobile, and fixed, yet because the stirring of time (which moves) always comes back to eternity, and because the movement turns in a temporal pattern, it happens that eternity (which in itself does not move) seems to be stirred through the time in which it is, and it is in time that all the stirring goes on. So it happens that eternity's stability is moved and that time's mobility becomes stable by the fixed law of its cycle [...].

32. The beginnings of everything, then, are god and eternity. But because it is mobile the world does not hold first place; mobility exceeds stability in it even though, conforming to the law that keeps it ever stirring, it has a steadfastness free of motion. The total consciousness that resembles divinity, immobile in itself, moves itself in its own stability.

¹²² Ph. Derchain, 'A propos de Claudien, Eloge de Stilichon II 424–436', *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde*, 89 (1956), 4–6.

¹²³ G. Casadio, 'Dall'Aion ellenistico agli angeli-coni gnostici', *Avallon*, 42 (1997), 45–62 (p. 45).

It would seem, then, that the relationship between eternity, the world, and time coincides with the relationship between god, the world, and time.¹²⁴

This quotation makes mention of the *mundus sensibilis* ('sensible world'), which, according to Kroll and Zepf, stands for the *kosmos noetos*.¹²⁵ Festugière brings a series of objections against Kroll's interpretation of *sensibilis* = *noetos*, although his conclusion is not much different: 'the *plan* of the Kosmos, the world as it is thought in the divine *Aion-Mind*'.¹²⁶ But the *plan* of the world thought by the divine Mind is still *within* the divine Mind, which possesses the archetypes of what will come to be. *Aeternitas*, then, is the intelligible world, which possesses the sensible world, as yet unborn, within itself. This does not rule out the possibility that, in the *Asclepius*, *sensibilis* has a more common meaning. In chap. 16, *deus sensibilis* is the world: 'dominus et omnium conformator, quem recte dicimus deum, quom a se secundum fecerit, qui videri et sentiri possit' (chap. 8);¹²⁷ 'caelum ergo, sensibilis deus' (chap. 3).¹²⁸ Just as in Hermetism, then, the world is the *secundus deus*: 'the master of Eternity is the first god, the world is second, mankind is third' (chap. 10). In conclusion, above the sensible world, which is also god, exists *Aeternitas*, which is identified with the intelligible world of the highest god.

There are intelligible gods who are characterized by their association with the distribution of the forms. It is probably they whom the author calls, using a neologism, the *ousiarchai* gods (chap. 19), that is, the gods who are lords of a substance. They are identical with those that are called *specierum principes* (rulers of species), that is to say transcendent substances.¹²⁹ They are, then, hypercosmic gods. Jupiter is the ousiarch of the heavens, light is the ousiarch of the sun, the Omniform is the ousiarch of the thirty-six decans, and Fortune or Fate is the ousiarch of the seven celestial

¹²⁴ According to the correct explanation of St. Gersh, 'Theological Doctrines of the Latin "Asclepius"', in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, ed. by R. T. Wallis and J. Bregman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 129–66 (p. 141).

¹²⁵ Kroll, *Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos*, p. 67 n. 2; Zepf, 'Der Gott aion', p. 239. Scott (*Hermetica*, III, 204), in order to support the interpretation of *kosmos noetos*, corrects the text to <in>*sensibilem*.

¹²⁶ Festugière, *Révélation*, IV, 171 n. 1.

¹²⁷ See the Greek text as preserved in Lactantius, *Div. instit.* IV. 6. 4, and the observations on p. 45.

¹²⁸ A passage commented by Scott (*Hermetica*, III, 93), who like me equates *sensibilis dei* with *mundi*.

¹²⁹ See Gersh, 'Theological Doctrines', pp. 148 and 165.

spheres.¹³⁰ The gods of the first group are superior to those of the second, since they rule their substance and their nature is defined as a combination of intelligible and sensible elements. One of them is Jupiter Plutonius, who rules the earth and the sea (chap. 27).¹³¹ Festugière and Gersh have compared this Hermetic system to that of contemporary Neoplatonists, such as Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Salustius.

This hierarchy of gods, however, poses a problem: how can it conform to what we encountered earlier, that is, the hierarchy composed of the highest god, his mind, and the world. According to Gersh, the series of intelligible gods must be thought of as a totality expressing the first god, whereas the sensible gods express the totality of the second god, such that the relations of the sensible gods to one another are similar to the relations existing among the intelligible gods.¹³² Thus, a supreme god exists who contains mind, and he is therefore a unity in his multiplicity; he produces a second god, who is constructed in a similar way and is thus also one in his multiplicity. The defining characteristic of this system is that both the first and the second principle are constituted by a multiplicity in their unity. This conception is influenced by Platonism and Stoicism: by the former in its contrast between the first god or mind and the second god or soul, and by the latter in its notion of a unifying force underlying all differentiation.

New, and in many ways 'scandalous' for Christians (as Augustine had already noted), is instead the doctrine that man, too, can create gods, no differently from the supreme god. 'Creating gods' (chaps 23–24, 37–38) is the work of that 'great miracle' who is man (chap. 6).¹³³ This doctrine derives from certain elements of ancient religion that were received by Hermetism and the other late imperial mysteries, namely the notion that gods are present in their statues. This same idea had also been put forward by Porphyry (*De imaginibus*, frags 2–3) and Maximus of Tyre (*Dissertatio* 1. 8. 3).¹³⁴ The doctrine of the *Asclepius* is different,

¹³⁰ See A.-J. Festugière, 'Les Dieux oustiarques de l'Asclepius', in Festugière, *Hermétisme et Mystique païenne*, pp. 121–30. Regarding the title 'Omniform', Festugière explains it (*Révélation*, III, 162) by observing that it indicates all the powers of god which, joined together, form his being.

¹³¹ I.e. a divinity both terrestrial and subterranean. Since it gives life to living beings, it is similar to the Punic Baal-Ammon, whom the inhabitants of Roman Africa had identified with Jupiter and Saturn. This would thus be an explanation added by the Latin translator, who came from Africa. Rochette, 'Un cas peu connu', p. 93.

¹³² Gersh, 'Theological Doctrines', p. 150.

¹³³ Mentioned briefly in Kroll, *Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos*, p. 91; more extensive treatment in Scott (*Hermetica*, III, 151–55).

¹³⁴ See Nock-Festugière, *ad locum*, n. 197. This theurgy was also diffused in the philosophical schools of the Late Empire: in addition to the texts cited by Nock-Festugière, Mahé (*Hermès en*

however, since its author maintains that man does not lure gods into statues but actually ‘creates’ gods to be put into statues, which have their own divine quality. According to Mahé this idea is of Egyptian origin.¹³⁵ To create the god, man must make use of the purest divine substance, on the one hand, and of matter proper, on the other (chap. 23). This means that man has power over the god, placing him in a statue that he himself constructs (chap. 37). This conception of human power — that it is capable of ‘creating’ gods — takes on a connotation similar to that of magic, and it was considered such in the Renaissance, when it raised problems in the thought of Christian Hermetists and roused suspicion against them.

The World

The cosmology of the *Asclepius* is very simple and is a link in the long tradition that dates back to Plato and the Stoics and that was diffused in the Latin context by Cicero’s philosophical dialogues. It posits that the world was created by god and testifies, in its beauty and perfection, to the excellence of its creator;¹³⁶ the world is *kosmos* (chap. 10), good and beautiful (chaps 8,¹³⁷ 26–27). The world also possesses the attributes that were popularized by the long Platonic-Stoic tradition: it is a living and eternal being (chaps 29 and 30). The world’s life is produced by its soul; this is an idea that was particularly diffused in Platonism (the Stoics prefer to speak of *pneuma*, i.e. ‘spirit’, instead of ‘soul’), and therefore the cosmology of the *Asclepius* would seem to be inspired by certain Platonic conceptions that were diffused and popularized in the Imperial Age. The soul, just like the world, is created by god (chap. 3).

The doctrine of matter is also Platonic-Stoic. The *Asclepius* speaks several times of *hyle*, ‘matter’, and the term is used in its Greek form by the Latin translator (chap. 14). Strangely, *hyle* is never translated as *materia*, which would have been an obvious choice in the fourth century (the term had been in general use from the time of Cicero), but only as *mundus* (see chap. 14; in chap. 7 *hylikon*, ‘material’, is translated as *mundanus*; the explanation ‘mundanus homo, id est corpus’ is found in chap. 37). The Latin translator seems to have understood matter as the world

Haute-Égypte, II, 100–02) calls our attention to Proclus, *In Platonis Rem publicam* II. 212 Kroll; Proclus, *Theologia Platonica* I. 4. 9.

¹³⁵ Mahé, *Hermès en Haute-Égypte*, II, 98, 223, 228.

¹³⁶ The Hermetic author’s admiration for the world’s beauty is also mentioned by Lactantius (p. 45); see Festugière, *Révélation*, III, 74.

¹³⁷ A passage that was interpreted in a peculiar way by Christian authors to mean that God loves his Son, as has been observed above, p. 45.

tout court. In fact, a little later (chap. 14) matter is said to be *mundi natura*, 'la nature matérielle' in Festugière's translation.

The world is animated by *spiritus*. 'Spirit' pervades the world and gives it life (see chap. 6; chap. 14 speaks of the 'existence of god and matter, which in Greek we call "world", and of the spirit that accompanies the world and is in the world'; there are several similar passages in chaps 17, 18, etc.¹³⁸). But such a doctrine of the cosmic 'spirit' was common in the Imperial Age. One writer contemporary with the *Asclepius*, Firmicus Maternus, with his mixture of Neoplatonism, Stoicism, and astrology, has what must be considered the typical example of a philosophico-religious mentality similar to that of Hermetism.¹³⁹ Firmicus also speaks of a 'spirit of the mind of god' (*Math.* IV. 1. 1), of a 'divine spirit' (I. 8. 3; III. *prooem.* 2), of a 'vital spirit' (I. 8. 6), of 'substance and spirit of life', and of a 'rationality of life and spirit' (IV. 1. 2). Firmicus attributes the same functions to the cosmic spirit as the Hermetic author: it is of divine origin and gives life to the world. For its part, Stoic pneumatology was also adopted in the Christian milieu (see Tertullian, *Apolog.* 21. 10; Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 19. 2). It would not be strange, then, if fourth-century Christians considered a Stoic pneumatology, such as the Hermetic one, to be analogous to their own doctrine of the Spirit, and if the substantial differences between the two conceptions were not always noted clearly.

All the things of the world constitute a unity: 'omnia unum esse et unum omnia', and since all things were 'in the creator' before diffusing into multiplicity, the creator can rightly be called 'everything' (chap. 2). The saying *solus omnia* or *unus omnia* recurs so often (see chaps 9, 20, 29–30, etc.) that it could be taken as emblematic of the *Asclepius*. And Tiberianus, around the same time, says: 'tu solus, tu multus item, tu primus et idem | postremus mediusque simul' (vv. 7–8).

Servius, when commenting on Virgil's hemistich, *Eclogae* III. 60 (*Iovis omnia plena*, which continued the Arataean *incipit: ab Iove principium*), cited other passages in support of this doctrine that could be located in the same Platonic-Stoic pantheistic context, namely *Aeneid* VI. 724–27 and Lucan IX. 580: 'Iuppiter est quodcumque vides, quodcumque moveris' ('Jupiter is everything you see, everything

¹³⁸ See Sfameni Gasparro, 'L'ermetismo', p. 241 n. 111.

¹³⁹ See C. Moreschini, 'Monoteismo cristiano e monoteismo platonico nella cultura latina dell'età imperiale', in *Platonismus und Christentum: Festschrift für Heinrich Dörrie*, ed. by H. D. Blume and Fr. Mann, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband*, 10 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1983), pp. 133–61 (pp. 157–59), in which are examined certain passages of Firmicus Maternus (*Math. prooemium*, v, and vii) previously discussed by F. Skutsch, P. Wendland, R. Reitzenstein, and E. Norden.

by which you are moved').¹⁴⁰ Another conception that probably contributed to the notion that god is in the world is that the world was created 'in the image' of god, that the world was a veritable image of him.

There is, in fact, a *cognatio* between man and god. This is an ancient conception. It is stated by Manilius II. 105: 'quis dubitet post haec hominem coniungere caelo?' ('who after this can doubt that a link exists between heaven and man?'; translation Goold); and, in the time of the *Asclepius*, by Avienus, *Phaenomena* 46–52:

Finally, that the heart of man not lie long languishing
and that his mind, forgetful of its earthly beginning, not gradually come to conceive
only vulgar thoughts and never raise itself up
to the origin of its eternal spring, from which, like a river
which hasty nature pushes on with rapid currents,
in a continuous flow the souls that are about to fall into our bodies
spring forth and form a chain through the ether.¹⁴¹

Similarly, this doctrine is also maintained by Firmicus Maternus (*Math.* I. 4. 2–3, 4. 4, 5. 9; VIII. 1. 4–5) and Lactantius (*De ira* 10. 52, 19. 2. 4).¹⁴²

The passage of the *Asclepius* (chap. 10) presents a difficulty where it reads: 'non ignarus se etiam secundam esse imaginem dei, cuius sunt imagines duae mundus et homo'. The majority of the manuscript tradition reads 'secundum se esse imaginem dei', that is, man knows that he has been made according to the image of god, instead of 'secundam esse imaginem dei' ('that he is the second image of god after the world'). 'Secundum se esse imaginem dei' is probably a Christian interpolation (see Genesis 1. 27), as Nock and Festugière also consider probable.¹⁴³

Man

Gnosis also appears in the *Asclepius* as one of the perfect individual's essential tasks. It is connected to the problem of the soul's origin and the presence of man

¹⁴⁰ This pantheism, and more precisely in the form of the two verses of Virgil and Lucan combined, was taken up in the fifteenth century by Pico della Mirandola, *Heptaplus*, ed. by E. Garin (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1942), p. 328. See C. Moreschini, 'Osservazioni sugli *Hymni Naturales* di Michele Marullo', *Res Publica Litterarum*, 6 (1982), 191–204. It would also become widely diffused in the course of the sixteenth century.

¹⁴¹ 'Denique, ne longum marcentia corda iacerent | mundanique ortus mens immemor omnia sensim | vilia conciperet neque se subduceret umquam | fontis in aeterni primordia, quo, velut amnis | quem festina citis urget natura fluentis, | lapsu continuo ruituræ in corpora nostra | prorumpunt animae seriemque per aethera nectunt.'

¹⁴² See Moreschini, 'Monoteismo cristiano e monoteismo platonico', pp. 159–60.

¹⁴³ Nock and Festugière, II, 308, and n. 95.

in the world, which was an extremely serious issue.¹⁴⁴ If the soul is of divine origin, why did it choose to abandon god and descend to earth? Was it a mistake, a misdeed? The *Asclepius*'s explanation was actually quite optimistic: god sent the soul to earth in order to complete the world with his presence.¹⁴⁵

We saw above that a material reality (*hylikon*) exists in man (chaps 7–8). Set against it is *ousiodes* (in Greek in the text), that is, 'essential' reality, essential in the sense that it constitutes the true essence of man. Nock-Festugière (III, n. 67) simply notes that *ousiodes* = *theios*, since the true essence of man is divine, man having been created by god in his image (see chap. 31 and *CHI*. 12–15). The translator, then, had difficulty rendering *ousiodes* in Latin. He could have used *substantialis*, which we find in a passage of his contemporary Ammianus Marcellinus (XXI. 1. 8), but perhaps he felt that *substantialis* meant something different, that is, not 'essential', 'according to its essence', as he wanted, but rather 'endowed with substance', as in point of fact Ammianus means when speaking of demons, which he defines as *substantiales potestates* (i.e. 'real powers', concrete, endowed with substance and not abstract). The Latin translator of the *Asclepius* thus also had to furnish a paraphrase, as had often happened in Latin translations from Greek since the times of Cicero: '*ousiodes, quam vocamus divinae similitudinis formam*' (chap. 7). Essential reality is the reality of the mind.

Of course, the better part of man is not the material part (chaps 6, 11).¹⁴⁶ Man's body is composed of the most corrupt parts of the world, that is, it is made of earth, which, if compared with the stars, is the worst part (chap. 22).¹⁴⁷ Man's true essence (*ousia*) is the form with which he resembles god (chap. 7), and this *ousia* of his is 'simple', because it does not follow the multiplicity of matter. Thus the *Asclepius* also emphasizes the dignity of intellectual knowing and condemns the fallacy of sensible impressions. Nevertheless, it does not scorn the world and everything connected to it, as do certain supra-intellectual and ascetic conceptions characteristic of various Gnostic theologies.

Man's corporeality is not condemned, however, for it is the consequence of god's providential will. The body serves to protect the soul (chap. 7), and man was

¹⁴⁴ See Festugière, *Revelation*, III, 16.

¹⁴⁵ On the optimism of certain Hermetic currents, see above, p. 14.

¹⁴⁶ See Büchli, *Der Poimandres*, p. 81.

¹⁴⁷ Important observations on this point are found in *Hermetica*, III, ed. by Scott, p. 147. Bousset (review of Kroll, *Die Lehren des Hermes Trismegistos*, in *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeige*, 1914, 717) also stresses how, according to Hermetists, certain elements are considered inferior and earthly, others superior and celestial; those that constitute the earthly part of man are fire, water, and air.

created with a body so that he might observe the beauty of the world and rule it. God, in his greatness and goodness, wanted there to be an other to contemplate his creation, that is, the world, and that is why he created man with the capacity to imitate his rationality and his art (*diligentia*) (chap. 8). Man's mortal condition was desired by god for a specific reason ('ad certam rationem', chap. 9), namely that he admire and worship celestial realities and rule earthly things (chaps 10–11). This is a duty that was entrusted to him (chap. 11), consisting in loving all the things beneath him (chap. 6).

Thanks to this double function, man occupies a central place in the world. He is not god, but his essence is divine; he is not pure matter, but he has been composed of matter so that he could govern and rule the world. That is why Trismegistus exclaims with wonder (and this exclamation would become famous): man is a 'great miracle', an animate being worthy of all honour and praise (chap. 6).¹⁴⁸ This exaltation of human dignity makes Hermetism a theosophy that cannot be connected to any intellectual movement of Roman Late Antiquity. Yet it was certainly pleasing to Christianity, which, admiring the perfection of divine creation, emphasizes the presence of God's image in man. Man's task is to contemplate supersensible reality and, at the same time, to administer earthly things. The doctrine of gnosis and the dignity of man is no doubt the fundamental message that the *Asclepius* bequeathed to subsequent centuries.

Gnosis

We have already spoken about gnosis on pp. 15–16 and p. 42. It is also central to the *Asclepius*.¹⁴⁹ Of all animate beings, only man can know and worship the creator (chaps 6, 9). This is due to the fact the human mind is of divine origin (chaps 5–7); *sensus* (i.e. intellect), *ratio*, and *intelligentia* have been given to man by god (chaps 7, 41) and derive from ether (chap. 6), as opposed to man's body, which is composed of material elements. *Sensus* is present both in man and in god (chap. 7) and it has the function of raising man, unique among all animate beings,

¹⁴⁸ Wlosok (*Laktanz*, p. 116, n. 6) observes that this conception is central in Hermetism and cites *CH* III. 3, IV. 2, XII. 20. It is even more fundamental for the *Asclepius*, however, which devotes much attention to it and turns it into the essential nucleus of the concept of 'human dignity', so popular in the Italian Renaissance.

¹⁴⁹ A study of the tradition of philosophical gnosis (although the Latin aspect does not receive full attention) is found in Wlosok, *Laktanz*. Regarding the gnosis of the *Asclepius* and Hermetism, let it suffice to mention Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, pp. 66–70 and 284–302; Mahé, 'La Voie d'immortalité', pp. 350–53.

up to an erect posture (chaps 6, 32).¹⁵⁰ In fact, erect posture permits man, alone among all living beings, to contemplate the heavens and thus to dedicate himself to the contemplative life.¹⁵¹

Gnosis, for its part, is something more than pure and simple knowledge. True philosophy consists in continuously contemplating god and holy religion (chap. 12) and depends solely on reverence (chap. 13).¹⁵² Gnosis requires an intellectual asceticism. The wise man must detach himself from matter and the passions that are produced from it (chaps 22, 11–12). God reveals himself to man not through ecstasy or mysticism but by illuminating him with the capacity of knowing, which clears the human mind of all error (chap. 29). Worldly things entice the soul of man and keep him from seeing god (chap. 12). It is characteristic of ancient theosophies that earthly reality keeps man from knowing transcendent reality.

The love of the god of the world (*deus caeli*) and of all the things existing in it consists in showing to him the same reverence he showed to the superior god. Only man possesses it, and consequently the heavens and the heavenly gods rejoice in the worship, praise, and reverence that man has for them (chap. 9). The Christian's love of God and the Hermetist's love of celestial reality are, of course, not the same thing, but they are linked by a common ambiguity.

Evil and Salvation

Evil exists, without a doubt, but there was no reason for god to intervene and end its existence. This answer to the inveterate problem of the origin of evil is nothing more than a statement of fact, and so it cannot satisfy the underlying question. The origin of evil, like good, must be traced back to matter. The *Asclepius* also shares this conviction: 'Just as there is a fertile quality in the nature of matter, so also is the same matter equally fertile in malice' (chap. 15).¹⁵³ As Lucentini observes, 'the anthropology of the *Asclepius* poses a problem: on the one hand it conceives of the body as created by God to complete man and make him an *imitator* of creative providence; on the other it exhorts man to despise the world

¹⁵⁰ On the interpretation of this passage, see also Wlosok, *Laktanz*, pp. 118–23: man, as 'animal adorandum atque honorandum', is able to raise his glance to the heavens and honour god.

¹⁵¹ See p. 42.

¹⁵² See pp. 18 and 43.

¹⁵³ 'sicuti enim in natura materiae qualitas fecunda est, sic et malignitatis eadem est aequae fecunda'.

and what is not “essential” in him, and thus also his body.¹⁵⁴ But precisely this dualism is characteristic of Christianity. So that man can avoid and reject evil, the Hermetic text proceeds, divine providence gave him *sensus*, that is, intellect, and the capacity to learn and to understand (chap. 16). Evil, therefore, comes from ignorance (chaps 7, 22). Once the soul has been penetrated by divine mind, it can no longer be troubled. Despite its beauty and the fact that it is the image of god (as the author defines it in an ‘optimistic’ context), despite the task, in itself certainly good, entrusted to man to *gubernare terrena*, even the *Asclepius* condemns the sensible world as the origin of evil. The author seeks to rebut the objections of those who accuse god of having consented to evil. If god had wanted, such critics argue, evil would never have existed (chap. 16). But the gnostic saves himself from the world’s evil. The impious man, on the contrary, will not be permitted to return to the celestial fatherland; as a punishment he will be subjected to metempsychosis in bodies less worthy than the human body (chap. 12), or he will be called before a demon judge (a *summus daemon*, chap. 37) (p. 43).

The Meaning of the Asclepius

Our investigation of the *Asclepius*’s principal doctrines has led to certain conclusions. First of all, the *Asclepius* is not a philosophical treatise but the product of a theosophy. It is marked by a thought process that develops with little logic and reason, that is incapable of clearly expressing the demonstration being formulated, and that falls into repetitions and disjunctions among its parts. But the non-philosophical course of the *Asclepius* (like the other Hermetic writings) is not due to inability, to ignorance or limited and superficial information, or to the degradation of a popular form of Platonism or Stoicism, as some scholars have thought in the past, but rather to a particular mode of thinking and teaching. This highly peculiar trait of the *Asclepius* does not derive so much from structural defects (although they do exist) as from a particular *forma mentis* that, as it created a *sermo religiosus*, thus in the sphere of philosophical thought created a certain form of theosophy. But in spite of these defects, the *Asclepius* has performed a function in Latin thought and Western culture that, if not more important than that of more erudite works, like Macrobius’s *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis*, Martianus Capella’s *Nuptiae*, or Boethius’s *De consolazione philosophiae*, was certainly not less. The *Asclepius* fills the void left by Latin Neoplatonists — Symmachus, Praetextatus,

¹⁵⁴ P. Lucentini, ‘Il problema del male nell’*Asclepius*’, in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity*, ed. by Lucentini, Parri, and Perrone Compagni, pp. 25–44 (pp. 35–36).

and others — who, devoted to commemorating the past, had become living museums and had met the end suited to them: living only in the confines of libraries, attempting to renew and awaken what were by then defunct, purely antiquarian forms of culture. The reader of the fourth or fifth century would not have been able to find any certainty or answers to the anguishing questions of life in the works of the Latin Neoplatonists, which at any rate were diffused only in learned circles. The *Asclepius*, on the contrary, with its theosophy, with its *pietas* and gnosis, with its exaltation of human dignity, furnished the Latin West of the late Imperial Age with the text and the certainty that were otherwise missing for non-Christians. The non-Christian reader found in the *Asclepius* the pagan equivalent of Christianity: revelation, gnosis, and the salvation reserved for the just.

Latin culture, with its receptiveness to Greek culture, once again behaved as it always had: it simplified what was available in Greek and adapted it to its own needs. This common attitude makes Lactantius and the anonymous translator of the *Asclepius* emblematic of their age. From the vast Hermetic literature available to them, both chose the *Logos teleios* and devoted the majority of their attention to it. This was probably no random choice. The *Perfect Discourse* must have appeared to them as the most complete and most satisfying of all the extant Hermetic treatises. From what we can reconstruct of the Greek original, from the Latin translations of Lactantius and the anonymous author of the *Asclepius* (with the necessary caution, of course, since it cannot be ruled out a priori that the original text contained something more than what its translators have passed on to us), it can be said that the *Logos teleios* appeared as the most complete of the Hermetic treatises, the one most consonant with the Latin mentality. In fact, the work does not contain the complicated hierarchies of divine being that are typical of Neoplatonism, and it simplifies the grades of being, allotting to man the function of intermediary between god and nature, a prestigious function and one specific to man alone.

The philosophico-religious culture of Late Antiquity wants both to see the presence of god in the sensible world and to establish an intermediation between him and earthly reality (not even Christians escape this tendency). It therefore creates a hierarchy composed of the highest god, minor gods (stars, demons, heroes), and man. The *Asclepius* reduces this need for intermediation to the essential and allots it the noblest function, placing man at the centre of the universe, between divine reality and material reality. What is more, anti-Christian elements, which certainly exist in the *Asclepius*, were rather discreet and, beyond those observed by Augustine, were not substantially noted.

Christianity, which ended up winning out over paganism precisely in the fourth century, also had good reason to find the *Asclepius*'s doctrines interesting — a certain kind of Christianity, that is.

The Gnostics who translated a part of the *Logos teleios* into Coptic also considered certain doctrines of the Hermetic treatise valid. Lactantius had previously demonstrated similar interest and, above all, had shown how such doctrines could be interpreted in a Christian sense. The knowledge of god, man's love of god and the world, the dignity of man himself, whose principal part, that is, mind, is of divine origin, god's supreme transcendence, angelology, and eschatology could be appreciated by Christians and, above all, considered by them as pagan doctrines in which divine revelation had been at least partially manifested. This manifestation was of course inferior to Christian revelation with regard to completeness and precision, but it was still truthful in at least some respects; Lactantius proposes a bold syncretism between Christianity and Hermetism. Such had also been the case with Virgil, who was thought to have foretold Christianity, and with Seneca, who was thought to have had an epistolary exchange with St Paul. As this kind of forerunner to the revealed truth, Hermetism, too, has its value for late antique Christianity. And that is why it manages to find a well-defined place in the world of pagan culture with which victorious Christianity competes. It is a place of prestige, guaranteed not only by the history and the most ancient traditions that had transmitted it, but also by its spiritual and cultural values. This place was such as to assure Hermetism's survival in the Middle Ages and its flourishing in the fifteenth century.

Augustine

The time of Augustine is notably changed from that of Lactantius and Constantine. After the sack of Rome in 410, all of pagan culture stands accused by the Bishop of Hippo, whose systematic and rigorous mind also subjects to examination the supposed revelation of Hermes. The pagan-Christian cultural *koine* of the Age of Constantine has vanished. An accommodation between the religion of Christ and the theosophy of Trismegistus no longer seems possible.

In a polemic against the Manicheans around the year 400, Augustine recalls that Faustus had observed that

If, as is rumored, predictions about Christ really had been made by the Sibyl or by Hermes, called 'Trismegistus', or by Orpheus or by other prophets of paganism, they will be able to help us somewhat in our faith, we who from pagans have been made Christians.¹⁵⁵ (*Contra Faustum manicheum* XIII. 1)

¹⁵⁵ 'Sane si sunt aliqua, ut fama est, Sibyllae de Christo praesagia, aut Hermetis, quem dicunt Trismegistum, aut Orphei, aliorumque in Gentilitate vatum, haec nos aliquanto ad fidem iuvare poterunt, qui ex Gentibus effimur Christiani.'

Thus even pagan oracular wisdom forecasts something of Christian truth. Augustine replies that

If the Sibyl or Sibyls, and Orpheus, and some Hermes or other, and still other pagan prophets or theologians or wise men or philosophers are said to have foretold or spoken the truth about the Son of God or about God the Father, then this can serve to confute the vanity of the pagans, but their authority should not be embraced. For we Christians worship that God about whom they could not keep silent, they who either dared to teach their fellow pagan peoples to venerate idols and demons, or who did not dare to prohibit such worship.¹⁵⁶ (XIII. 15)

Something analogous regarding the relationship between pagan revelation and Christianity was said by another individual who moved in the orbit of the grand figure of Augustine. Longinianus, a pagan correspondent of his, was among those pagan intellectuals who were close to Christianity and recognized that an affinity existed between it and the best intellectual currents of paganism, but who neither felt the need nor saw the justification for taking the decisive step and abandoning pagan culture and traditions.¹⁵⁷ Longinianus, therefore, openly states his agreement with many of Augustine's opinions, and he observes that both men respect and practice teachings that date back to the first age of the world, including, in particular, those of Trismegistus, which were spread by the inspiration of the gods and were revealed by the will of God. For pagans, with their henotheistic worldview, it is natural that there exist both gods and god, and therefore Longinianus also believes that the teachings of Trismegistus were born 'thanks to the authority of the gods' and shown to man 'by the will of god' (*epist.* 234. 1).

Later, in *De baptismo parvulorum* (VI. 44. 87), Augustine cites pseudo-Cyprian's *Quod idola dii non sint* 6 (p. 30), on which he plainly draws when talking about Hermes, and states that 'Hermes Trismegistus also speaks of one lone god and acknowledges that he is incomprehensible and cannot be judged'.¹⁵⁸ Augustine considers Hermes to be among those pagans who were able to say something

¹⁵⁶ 'Sibylla porro, vel Sibyllae, et Orpheus, et nescio quis Hermes, et si qui alii vates vel theologi, vel sapientes, vel philosophi Gentium de Filio Dei, aut de Patre Deo vera praedixisse seu dixisse perhibentur, valet quidem aliquid ad Paganorum vanitatem revincendam, non tamen ad istorum auctoritatem amplectendam; cum illum Deum nos colere ostendimus, de quo nec illi tacere potuerunt, qui suos congenitiles populos idola et daemonia colenda partim docere ausi sunt, partim prohibere ausi non sunt.'

¹⁵⁷ Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, p. 210.

¹⁵⁸ 'Hermes quoque Trismegistus unum Deum loquitur, et eum incomprehensibilem atque inaestimabilem confitetur.'

divinely inspired and correct in their doctrines and who therefore were not condemned by the Christian *sancti*, despite the fact that they were detestable for their idolatry and their customs and were destined for divine punishment. In any case, 'Even if this thing of yours be perfect and true, it would still do you no good if you did not come to the grace of Christ'.¹⁵⁹ This is Augustine's conviction, and it also applies to Trismegistus's preaching: every positive value in human affairs is useless, unless it is accompanied by the knowledge of Christ. Therefore in the discussion of the *De civitate Dei*, a work that undertakes a comprehensive reconsideration of pagan culture, Augustine assumes the same posture. He knows that Trismegistus was a very ancient prophet, prior to Greek culture, but nevertheless (according to a topos of Christian apologetics), he came after the rise of Hebraic wisdom from which Christianity had its origins:

Regarding philosophy, which claims to teach something about how men attain happiness, such studies flourished [in Egypt] in the time of Mercury, called Trismegistus. This was certainly long before the wise men or philosophers of Greece, but yet after Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, and much later than Moses himself. In fact, it turns out that Moses was born in the lifetime of Atlas, the great and famous astrologer, brother of Prometheus, maternal grandfather of the older Mercury, whose grandson was the Mercury Trismegistus we are talking about.¹⁶⁰ (*De civ. Dei* XVIII. 39)

But Hermetic doctrine must in any case be rejected, because it lacks all validity. Augustine wages this polemic in *De civitate Dei* VIII. 23–26, right after having confuted the demonology of Apuleius. It is based exclusively on the *Asclepius* and on no treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.¹⁶¹ Apuleius had maintained that a demon

¹⁵⁹ 'Hoc vobis quamvis integrum et verum, nihil tamen prodesset, nisi ad Christi gratiam veniretis.'

¹⁶⁰ 'Nam quod attinet ad philosophiam, quae se docere profitetur aliquid unde fiant homines beati, circa tempora Mercurii, quem Trismegistum vocaverunt, in illis terris eius modi studia claruerunt, longe quidem ante sapientes vel philosophos Graeciae, sed tamen post Abraham et Isaac et Iacob et Ioseph, nimirum etiam post ipsum Moysen. Eo quidem tempore quo Moyses natus est, fuisse reperitur Atlans ille magnus astrologus, Promethei frater, maternus avus Mercurii maioris, cuius nepos fuit Trismegistus iste Mercurius.' Similar information is given in another passage (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 26); it was taken up by Renaissance Hermetists (see p. 145).

¹⁶¹ Perhaps because of his superficial knowledge of Greek, and perhaps also because he was forced by the scope of his work to make use of the documents of pagan culture that were available in the immediate vicinity. At any rate, I do not think there were many people in Africa at that time with a better knowledge of Greek than Augustine (but this is an old problem), nor that many Greek texts circulated (and this is in line with the diminishing diffusion of Greek culture in the Latin West).

was an 'intermediate reality' (*medietas*),¹⁶² and Augustine equally rejects Hermes' teaching, which he found in *Asclepius* 23,¹⁶³ that some gods were created by the supreme god, others by men. The latter are no ordinary idols. Hermes speaks of statues that can be seen and touched and that are none other than the visible bodies of gods; they house spirits, either good or evil, that are called to live in them by men. These spirits are united with the statues by means of magic, such that the statue can be considered, in a certain sense, the sensible body of the demon itself. This is why it can be said that men create gods. Thereupon follows the *Asclepius*'s prediction (chap. 24) about the abandonment and the oblivion that will befall the most ancient cults of the Egyptian religion. Augustine connects all this, as does a good part of modern scholarship,¹⁶⁴ to the advent of Christianity, which will squash the idolatrous religions and liberate men from the very gods they had created. Augustine notes that in this prediction Hermes takes the part of the gods, deploring the moment when their ancient cult must end. Its forecast confirms what later happens; therefore the prophecy is surely true. The Egyptian wise man can be thought of like those spoken of by the apostle Paul in Romans 1. 21–25, who, despite knowing the true God, did not worship him as such, on account of which their wisdom is reduced to being vanity. This contradiction, which is typical of those who have not confessed the true religion, is revealed by the fact that they have professed doctrines that do not contradict Christianity, such as the creation of the world by God. Augustine, then, like Lactantius before him, does not doubt that the supreme god mentioned in the *Asclepius* is the God of the Christians.

Augustine continues: for Hermes to deplore the cult of idols is as impudent as it is vain for him to believe in men's ability to create gods to which they must then be subjected. Indeed, Hermes' revelation (and this is the fundamental point), however truthful, is not divinely inspired. It only reaches a partial degree of truth, a level that is then surpassed by Christian revelation; it is true in the same way as the predictions (found in the Gospels) of the demons who had to admit that Christ was the 'son of God' (see Matthew 8. 29). Christian revelation admits that idolatry exists, as the demons had taught, but it also says that it must be exterminated and

¹⁶² See C. Moreschini, *Apuleio e il platonismo*, Accademia Toscana di Scienze e Lettere La Colombaria, 'Studi' 51 (Florence: Olschki, 1978), pp. 240–54, with bibliography.

¹⁶³ Thus, Augustine knows that the *Asclepius* is a translation (see *De civ. Dei* VIII. 23).

¹⁶⁴ Different from the understanding of Augustine and of traditional scholarship is the interpretation of Mahé and Fowden, see p. 47, note 77. That the apocalypse consisted in the disappearance of the *cultus idolorum* is also said in *De civ. Dei* VIII. 24 (see *qua transacta*: scl., the *dominatio daemoniorum* and men's *captivitas*).

destroyed. A passage from the prophet Isaiah (19. 1) provides Augustine with a citation well suited to his reasoning, precisely because it condemns the idolatry of Egypt.

In any case, Augustine argues, the *Asclepius* itself (chap. 37) teaches that the doctrine according to which the idols were created by men was mistaken, saying that ancient Egyptians 'erred greatly' in their search for the true cult (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 24). The Hermetic text, however, does not say this; instead it reads: 'Our forefathers once made a great mistake about the nature of god: they did not believe, and they did not see to the veneration and the true cult of god. But then they discovered the art of making gods.' Thus, according to the author of the *Asclepius*, the error of the ancient Egyptians was *antecedent* to the discovery of the fabrication of statues and was corrected thanks to it, whereas for Augustine the error consists precisely in that fabrication, which was a manifestation of the Egyptians' idolatry. It serves as an involuntary admission that demons are deceivers and fallacious in their teaching. The Hermetic writer has been forced by the power of the facts (interpreted a posteriori, because they became clear after the advent of Christian truth) to admit that the cult of the idols invented by the ancient Egyptians was simply a grave error (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 24 and 26). In conclusion, if it was men who created gods, gods would be in the power of men, as is the case for all the idols; and since Hermes admits that the gods were created by men, he admits that they should not be worshiped by those who did not create them and who do not have the same belief, that is, Christians.

In chap. 26 Augustine examines the apocalypse of the *Asclepius*, which to him seems to foretell the establishment of the cult of the dead in place of the most ancient religious practices of Egypt:

But Hermes seems to be pained by the idea that the monuments of our martyrs would take the place of their temples and altars, just like those who read these words with a spirit that is hostile to us or perverse might think that pagans worship their gods in temples, while we Christians practice the cult of the dead in tombs.¹⁶⁵ (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 26)

As a matter of fact, pagans did accuse Christians for the worship that took place in their churches as if it were a cult of the dead. Augustine twists the polemic, observing that it is the pagans who worship the dead, since their gods are none other than dead men who have been deified. Augustine's reference to Varro (*De civ. Dei*

¹⁶⁵ 'Sed hoc videtur dolere, quod memoriae martyrum nostrorum templis eorum delubrisque succederent, ut videlicet, qui haec legunt animo a nobis averso atque perverso, putent a paganis cultos fuisse deos in templis, a nobis autem coli mortuos in sepulcris.'

VIII. 26)¹⁶⁶ is standard in Christian apologetics and in polemics against paganism. In Augustine's view, the deification of Asclepius and Hermes, who was the grandfather of Trismegistus (*Ascl.* 37), is perfect confirmation of this pagan custom of transforming one's own dead into gods. Therefore, it is not Christians but pagans who practice the cult of the dead: Isis and Osiris, as the *Asclepius* says, submit to anger and to goodwill, since they are formed of soul and body, just like men. Thus, already in the times of Hermes, Egypt was full of dead men (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 26).

To conclude, Augustine replaces Lactantius's syncretism with a strong anti-pagan polemic. Whereas Hermetic revelation is for Lactantius a valid, albeit partially limited, source of truth, for Augustine it is substantially superfluous. Triumphant Christianity makes a selection of Hermetism, as it does of contemporary Platonism, as a result of which many doctrines were dropped and others taken up. Augustine, who rejected almost everything, was more rigorous. It is no accident that Augustine utterly neglects the well-known passage of the *Asclepius* on the 'creation' of the second god, which was so important for Lactantius, and that he turns instead to the so-called 'apocalypse', which he understands as the destruction of idolatrous worship in Egypt — whereas Lactantius still considers it an apocalypse in the sense of a revelation of the future destruction of the world. These two antithetical postures, of Augustine and Lactantius, will be taken up again in the Renaissance, at which point Christian Hermetists will be faced with the necessity of reconciling them with one another.

Quodvultdeus

Hermetism also becomes an element of Christian culture, although by now limited to a few essential doctrines, by way of works of minor writers that in the Middle Ages were thought to be by Augustine. The *Adversus quinque haereses* perhaps belongs to Quodvultdeus, a pupil of Augustine who was Bishop of Carthage until exiled by the Vandal king Geiseric in 439. It is probably a homily whose object is to confute paganism, Judaism, Manichaeism, Sabellianism, and Arianism (thus the term 'heresy' must be understood in a broad sense, as a 'false doctrine').¹⁶⁷ Since the

¹⁶⁶ See *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1898), XV, 9a Agahd; H. Hagendahl, *Augustine and the Latin Classics, with a Contribution on Varro by B. Cardauns*, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia*, 20. 1 (Göteborg: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967), p. 297.

¹⁶⁷ This is the position, among others, of R. Braun in Quodvultdeus, *Livre des promesses et des prédictions de Dieu*, ed. with an intro., French translation, and notes by Braun, *Sources Chrétiennes*,

text is not well known, but, as we shall see, was broadly diffused in the Middle Ages (on account of its being attributed to Augustine), we shall cite it extensively, doing our best to overcome the tedium of its sermonizing style.

Hermes, who in Latin is called Mercury, wrote a book called *logos teleios*, that is, 'perfect Word': great is the title of this book, because great is he about whom it was written [...]. Let us hear what Mercury says about the perfect Word: 'The Lord and creator of all the gods,' he says, 'made a second God <from> himself.' And a little later, to explain what he had said, he repeats it and says: 'since, then, he had made this God first and alone and one, he seemed to him good and abounding in all good things.' How abounding in all good things, let John the Evangelist say: 'we all took from his abundance, grace for grace' (John 1. 16). So, he seemed good and abounding in all good things. He continues: 'And he was delighted.' About what or with whom was he delighted? Let the Wisdom of God itself, the Son of God, tell it: 'I was the one with whom he was delighted' (Proverbs 8. 30). [...] You, pagan, were looking for the wife of God. Listen to your Mercury: [...] 'The wife of God is goodwill.' [...] And yet Mercury professes that the Son of God is God. [...] In another passage he calls the Son of God *symbolon*, that is, 'counsel' or 'counselor'. And the prophet says (Isaiah 9. 6): 'His name will be "wonderful counselor", mighty and powerful God.' [...] I do not cite you my authors; Mercury is yours, and you all have given him such great honour and respect among the gods as to call the day of the Lord by his name. Listen to him, let him convince you, let him confute you, such that, once he has won, you will submit to his words and believe me. Mercury said: 'God loved him whom he had generated.' Mercury himself said: 'Son of the blessed God and of goodwill.' And, so as to avoid the unpleasantness of a question about his name, he continued, adding: 'His name cannot be uttered by the mouth of man.' Why do you, Mercury, say that the name of the Son of God cannot be uttered by men? Let it be uttered by you, you who were judged by men not a man but a god. God, then, speaks to his Son, saying: 'Son, there exists an unutterable, holy Word (*sermo*) of holy Wisdom.' Might this not amount to the phrase: 'In the beginning was the Word' (John 1. 1)? Tell me, Hermes, does this Word of Wisdom have a mother? He continues: 'it is of the Lord alone and of God who rules all mortal things.' And since the answer cannot be sought by men, he adds these words: 'it is above men.' [...] Oh pagan, recognize your God. It is he and no other, not Mars, not Jove, not Mercury, but the one Mercury confesses. Oh Christian, why are you surprised that they can say such things about the Father and the Son? Even demons believe and tremble. Indeed, in the Gospels, when the Lord passes, they say: 'We know who you are, Son of God. Have you come ahead of time to destroy us?' (Mark 1. 24; Matthew 8. 29).¹⁶⁸ (Quodvultdeus, *Adversus quinque Haereses* 3. 4–21)

101 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1964), pp. 107–13, after an ample discussion of the problem (pp. 88–106).

¹⁶⁸ Ed. by R. Braun, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, 60 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976): 'Hermes, qui latine Mercurius dicitur, scripsit librum qui *logos teleios* appellatur, id est verbum perfectum: magnum nomen libri huius, quia magnus est de quo iste scriptus est liber. [...] Audiamus quid loquatur Mercurius, de verbo perfecto: dominus, inquit, et omnium factor deorum

As Siniscalco observes, the author understands the title *Logos teleios* to mean the Word of God, which as such is of course perfect; therefore the Hermetic book speaks about the Son of God, and so Lactantius's text is ransacked for essential elements, those typical of the original Hermetic text.¹⁶⁹ Consequently, and in spite of Augustine's polemic against Hermetism, with Quodvultdeus 'Hermes returns to being the fully authoritative source to look to; the interpretation that Lactantius had given to our passage once again receives corroboration'.¹⁷⁰ This will be of great importance for Hermetism's future fate in a Christian context and for its evaluation at the hands of medieval philosophy. Quodvultdeus takes up the passage of the *Logos teleios* cited by Lactantius in *Divinae Institutiones* IV. 6. 4, and also his Christian interpretation of it, viz. that Hermes is referring to the 'creation' of the 'second God', that is, the Son. Hermetism, then, is not a pagan 'heresy', but rather it serves to demonstrate the vanity of paganism. Moreover, the Son is the

secundum <a> se fecit deum. Et post pauca, ut ostenderet quid dixerit, repetiit et dixit: quoniam ergo hunc fecit primum et solum et unum; bonus autem ei visus est et plenissimus omnium bonorum. Quantum plenissimus Iohannes dicat euangelista: *de plenitudine eius nos omnes accepimus, gratiam pro gratia*. Bonus autem ei visus est, et plenissimus omnium bonorum. Et sequitur: laetatus est. Cui vel cum quo laetatus est? Dicat ipsa sapientia dei, filius dei: *ego eram cui adgaudebat*. [...] Quaerebas, pagane, coniugem dei. Audi Mercurium tuum: [...] Coniunx dei est bona voluntas. [...] Et tamen filium dei deum fatetur Mercurius. [...] Alio loco filium dei *symbolon* appellat id est consilium vel consiliarium. Et propheta dicit: *vocabitur nomen eius admirabilis consiliarius, deus fortis et potens*. [...] Non tibi meos auctores profero; tuus est Mercurius, cui inter deos tantus honor cultusque adlatus est a vobis ut eius nomine diem domini vocaretis. Ipsum audi, ipse te conuincat, ipse te expugnet, ut cum te uicerit, illi cedas et mihi credas. Mercurius dixit: dilexit deus genitum suum. Ipse dixit: filius benedicti dei atque bonae voluntatis. Et, ne de eius nomine taedium interrogationis sustineret, secutus adiunxit: cuius nomen non potest humano ore narrari. Quid tu, Mercuri, ab hominibus dicis nomen filii dei narrari non posse? a te narretur, qui non homo, sed deus ab hominibus aestimaris. Eloquitur autem ad filium suum dicens: est autem quis, fili, inenarrabilis sermo sapientiae sanctus sanctae. Nonne hoc est: *in principio erat verbum*? dic, Hermes, sermo iste sapientiae habet matrem? Sequitur: de solo domino et omnium dominante deo mortalium. Et quia ab hominibus indagari non potest, addit et dicit: super homines est. [...] Ipsum tuum cognosce (scl. pagane) deum, ipsum non alium, non Martem, non Iovem, non Mercurium, sed quem confitetur Mercurius. Quid miraris, christiane, quod talia isti de Patre et Filio dicant? et daemones credunt et contremiscunt. Nempe in euangelio transeunte domino dicunt: *novimus qui sis, filius dei, venisti ante tempus perdere nos*.

¹⁶⁹ Siniscalco, 'Ermete Trismegisto', p. 104.

¹⁷⁰ Siniscalco, 'Ermete Trismegisto', p. 109. According to Nock ('Two Notes. I. Asclepius and Quodvultdeus', *Vigiliae Christianae*, 3 (1948), 48–55) and Siniscalco, the passages of Lactantius imitated by Quodvultdeus are *Div. instit.* IV. 6. 1; IV. 7. 3; *Epit.* 37. 4. The citation of the Sibyl's oracle, again found in Lactantius, is also adduced.

‘counselor’ of the Father in the act of creation, as Lactantius had stated (*Epit.* 37: above, p. 45). Mercury had said that the name of God cannot be uttered by the mouth of man, because God has no name, according to Lactantius (*Div. instit.* I. 6. 4); Lactantius had said that Mercury was considered nearly a god (I. 6. 1). He knows that an ineffable and holy Word exists (see Lactantius, *Div. instit.* IV. 7. 3). Quodvultdeus accentuates the Christian interpretation and appeals to various scriptural citations as well.

Since the writer took this passage not from Augustine, who does not cite it at all (which is understandable, considering his polemical attitude towards Hermes), but from Lactantius, Hermetism comes to be considered a revelation, akin to Christianity, that is useful for confuting pagans who criticize Christians for preaching a disguised polytheism (in the sense that they venerate two gods). But this independence from Augustine — the fact that the writer does not follow the man who is supposedly his master but rather Lactantius, someone who had no authority for him — seems to me substantially to weaken the hypothesis that Quodvultdeus is the author of the work. In fact, in the *Liber promissionum et praedictorum Dei* (III. 38. 45), which truly does seem to be a work of Quodvultdeus, the writer refers to a telling episode that happened in the province Avaritana — that ancient statues of gods had been found hidden in caves and caverns — and he connects it to Hermes’ own wistful prediction: ‘Then this holiest of lands, home of sanctuaries and temples, will be full of tombs and dead men’ (*Ascl.* 24).¹⁷¹ For this interpretation Quodvultdeus follows Augustine (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 26).

Eastern Christian Hermetism

Apologetics

The first Christian testimony about Hermetism is found early enough, at the end of the second century, although it is meagre. Athenagoras (*Legatio* 28) knows the name of Hermes Trismegistus. Nevertheless he does not seem to know his doctrines. He says only that, as Hermes attests, the gods of Egypt are deified kings.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ ‘Tunc terra ista sanctissima, sedes delubrorum atque templorum, sepulcrorum erit mortuorumque plenissima.’

¹⁷² Athenagoras’s reference was pointed out by Scott (*Hermetica*, I, 87), Festugière (*Révélation*, I, 78), and Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 216–17.

The *Refutatio omnium Haereseon*, also called *Elenchos* and attributed to Hippolytus, was probably composed in the first decades of the third century.¹⁷³ This work contains evidence that there was a heretical sect, the Perates, that included the name of Hermes Trismegistus, along with other individuals, historical and otherwise, in a list of god's powers. The context is strongly imbued with Egyptian traditions.¹⁷⁴

The right-side power of god rules over the production of fruits: common ignorance has called him 'Min'. In his image were born Boumegas, Ostanes, Hermes Trismegistus, Kuritis, Petosiris, Zosarion, Berosus, Astrampsouchos, Zorastris. (VI. 14. 8)

The Age of Constantine and the Greek Fourth Century

As was said above, the treatises that constitute the present *Corpus Hermeticum* were written in the Greek world before the third century, and in the fifth century Stobaeus collected a large number of fragments of Hermetic texts. The Christianization of Hermetic doctrines appears in Marcellus of Ancyra, a contemporary of Lactantius and a hardy defender of the Nicene Creed on the basis of modalist conceptions. Marcellus rebuked Eusebius of Caesarea,¹⁷⁵ who was reluctant to accept the 'consubstantial', for thinking in a way similar to the heretic Valentinus and to Hermes, just as he had rebuked Bishop Narcissus of Neronias (a friend of Eusebius) for thinking like Marcion and Plato. The point of the accusation is that Eusebius, after the manner of Origenes, spoke of two divine hypostases and thus, like Hermes, believed in the existence of two gods.¹⁷⁶ Nock and Festugière also think

¹⁷³ The identity of this individual was much discussed towards the end of the last century, and it was substantially concluded that the corpus of works attributed to Hippolytus must be attributed to two different individuals who (for us) have the same name. Consequently, the author of the *Refutatio* is not the same as that of other works attributed to 'Hippolytus'.

¹⁷⁴ On this passage see, among others, J. Montserrat-Torrens, 'Les Pérates', in *Pléroma: Salus carnis, Homenaje a Antonio Orbe, S.J.*, ed. by E. Romero-Pose, with the assistance of J. Rius-Camps and J. Montserrat-Torrens (Santiago de Compostela: Imprenta Aldecoa, Burgos, 1990), pp. 229–42 (p. 232).

¹⁷⁵ Marcellus's accusation of Eusebius is mentioned by Eusebius himself in his *Against Marcellus* I. 4. 26.

¹⁷⁶ For his part, Valentinus believed (according to the accusation of the heresiologists) that the eons were absolutely separate from one other and thus individual substances, after the manner of distinct gods. Fowden (*The Egyptian Hermes*, p. 209) says that 'Marcellus [...] adduced the passage from the *Perfect Discourse* (*Ascl.* 8) about the material world being a second god, offspring of the

that Eusebius of Caesarea (in *Adversus Hieroclem* 42) made use of Hermetic texts (e.g. *CH* VII. 1), despite the fact that he does not refer to any explicitly.¹⁷⁷

Pseudo-Anthymus (*Ad Theodorum* 10–11) quotes the Greek text of the *Logos teleios*, which was taken into consideration by Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones* IV. 6. 4, as we saw at pp. 44–45, and was translated in *Asclepius* 8:¹⁷⁸

Hermes, dubbed Trismegistus, speaks thus to the physician Asclepius: ‘Listen, then, Asclepius. The lord and creator of the universe, whom we are used to calling “god”, made yet a second god, visible and sensible [...].’ And then Trismegistus says again: ‘And when he had made him first and alone and unique, he seemed to him beautiful and abounding in all good things; for this reason he admired and loved him very dearly as his own son.’

A knowledge of Hermetic doctrines is also attested in Gregory of Nazianzus. In a passage of his second *Theological Oration* (*Orat.* 28. 4) he refers to Plato’s famous dictum (*Tim.* 28d) that imagining god is difficult but, once one knows him, speaking of him to others is impossible. It is uncertain whether Gregory took it from Plato directly or from Hermetism (which had adopted it, since it is quoted by *Exc. Stob.* 1), as Jean Pepin thought.¹⁷⁹ In a poem addressed to his friend Nemesius, renowned for his eloquence but still a pagan, Gregory bids him to abandon his error and to put a stop to the songs of Orpheus, Hesiod, Homer, and other famous poets. The pagan gods must submit to bringing aid to Gregory’s Christian poetry; in their number is also Hermes, the god of eloquence, called ‘thrice-great’, and the Sibyl. Perhaps Gregory is referring to them when he says enigmatically that ‘some of the wise men of the Greeks were utterly without light, whereas others caught a brief glimpse of the flashing bolt, but they immediately lost it’ (*Carm.* II. II. 7. 239–45).

Cyril of Alexandria

The attempt to reconcile Christianity with Hermetism reached its peak in Cyril of Alexandria, who on this account aroused a great deal of interest in the

One God’. Nevertheless, although Marcellus is discussing the passage of Proverbs 8. 22, typical in the Arian controversy, which regards Wisdom understood as the Son of God, he does not make reference to the *Logos teleios*.

¹⁷⁷ See *CH* I. 81 n. 2.

¹⁷⁸ I have consulted it in the edition of Nock and Festugière, *CH*, II, 305.

¹⁷⁹ Jean Pepin, ‘Grégoire de Nazianze lecteur de la littérature hermétique’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 36 (1982), 251–60; I followed Pepin’s hypothesis in *Filosofia e letteratura in Gregorio di Nazianzo* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1997), pp. 36–37, but I am no longer certain.

Renaissance. In his *Contra Iulianum*, a response, written around 440, to Julian's *Contra Galilaeos*, Cyril seeks an accord between Christianity and the doctrines of Hermetism, no differently from what Lactantius had done in the Latin milieu. He quotes both the treatises that will end up constituting the *Corpus Hermeticum*¹⁸⁰ and other writings that we do not know.

A general opinion on Trismegistus is found in I. 41:

But I think Hermes the Egyptian, who they say also had the title of 'Trismegistus', should be considered worthy of consideration and mention. For the men of that time held him in high esteem and, as some think, they likened him to the one who, according to myth, was born of Zeus and Maia. Now, this Hermes of Egypt, although he was an initiator of certain rites and always resided near the temples of idols, appears to have had the same doctrines as Moses, even if not absolutely correctly and faultlessly, but at any rate in part; and he also benefited from them.

He is also spoken of by the author who, in Athens, assembled in one of his works the fifteen books entitled *Treatises of Hermes*. The doctrines contained there illustrate Hermes' vast knowledge of astronomy, land surveying, hydraulics, astrology, the arts, and grammar.

In *Contra Iulianum* I. 50 Cyril maintains that the Greeks formulated absurd hypotheses whenever they presented their own doctrines, whereas they progressed at least somewhat towards the truth when they sought it where it could be found, namely in Mosaic Law. This was possible in Egypt at least, where Moses had been renowned for his knowledge and some traces of his teaching had remained. Pythagoras and Plato, then, while in Egypt, learned those doctrines that Moses had left there. Furthermore, the Law of Moses, from which both Jewish and Christian doctrine were derived, was more ancient than any Greek philosophy and even than any form of literature among the Greeks. If anyone, it was the Greek wise men who took their doctrines from Moses (I. 5–18; II. 16). This is the ancient conviction, both Jewish and Christian, of the so-called 'theft of the Greeks', which was revived in the sixteenth century.

On the basis of this principle, Cyril compiles a doxography (I. 42–43) of the opinions of the pagan wise men (Pythagoras, Plato, and Hermes) who had beliefs about God that were in some way correct and that reached full truth with Christian revelation. *Contra Iulianum* I. 43 also contains the Hermetic testimony about the unknowability and ineffability of god, derived from Plato's famous dictum (*Tim.* 28d). Its first part ('so, as the weaker differs from the stronger and the worse from the better, thus the mortal differs from the divine and the immortal')

¹⁸⁰ They are found in the fourth volume of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. by Nock and trans. by Festugière.

coincides with the oft-encountered *Excerptum Stobaei* I, but the second, which is much longer and continues through to chap. 44, is totally different. It insists particularly on the transcendence of the Beautiful and the Good, whose various qualities it enunciates,¹⁸¹ and for this reason it appears to Cyril as an important Hermetic witness to the greatness of the Christian God. Generally speaking, then, pagan wisdom partially foretold Christian Trinitarian theology. In I. 45–46, Cyril corroborates this thesis by quoting doctrines of Porphyry and Orpheus, and in I. 46 he adduces a series of Hermetic passages that can be interpreted as Hermes' testimony about the existence of the divine Logos and the generation of the Father (frags 27–30 Nock-Festugière). Like those of Lactantius, they are situated 'on the border' between Christian theology and pagan theosophy, and they can be adapted to both cultural contexts. The first corroborates, in Cyril's mind, Logos's origin from the first God, its perfection, and its generative capacity:

Hermes says this about god: 'The Logos of god, which proceeds completely perfect and fertile and as a demiurge, fell, in its fertile nature, into fertile water and impregnated the water. He is the first born of the all-perfect, himself a perfect son and prolific.'

The second:

The pyramid, then, is the foundation of nature and the intelligible world; indeed, like a ruler standing over nature, it possesses the creator Logos. This Logos is of the lord of all things¹⁸² and is the first power after him; it is ungenerated, infinite; the power emerged from him, and it is Logos who stands above and commands all things that were created by him; Logos is the first born of the all-perfect, his legitimate son, perfect and generative.

In the third fragment, Hermes, when questioned by one of the servants of the sanctuaries of Egypt, insists on the perfection of Logos, born perfect from the perfect, and a vivifier.

The last, taken from the first book of the *Detailed Discourses*¹⁸³ (*of Hermes*) to *Tat*, is composed of two series of definitions (the first in the form of a negative theology) that emphasize the supreme greatness of Logos:

¹⁸¹ This second part constitutes frags 25 and 26 Nock-Festugière.

¹⁸² The text is unclear; the difficulty of the passage of the *Logos teleios* quoted by Lactantius, *Div. instit.* IV. 7. 3: 'the cause of this cause' (see above, p. 39) seems to be repeated here; the phrase: 'the creator Logos [who] is of the lord of all things' should, in my view, be understood as: 'the Logos that belongs to the lord of all things', i.e. the first god. The first god is indicated by the word 'him' (*ekeinon*) and, a little later, by 'all-perfect'.

¹⁸³ This term designates a certain kind of Hermetic literature, attested also in the exordium of the *Asclepius* (see above, p. 3). Further details can be found in Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, pp. 99, 180, 197.

The same man, in the first of his *Detailed Discourses to Tat*, says about god: The Logos of the creator, my son, is eternal, self-moving, without growth or diminution, immutable, incorruptible, unique and always the same as itself, even and uniform, stable, ordered, unique after the first god, who is like him.

And just as Cyril had turned to Porphyry to demonstrate the agreement between Christianity and pagan philosophy about the doctrine of the Son, thus immediately thereafter (I. 47–49) he uses that doctrine to show that philosophy also had a notion, albeit imprecise, about the existence of the Spirit.¹⁸⁴ According to Hermes, in the third of the *Discourses to Asclepius*¹⁸⁵ (I. 48 = frag. 23):

intellectual light existed, unique and alone, and it existed always, luminous Mind of Mind, and nothing other than the unity of this Mind existed; it always exists in itself, always contains all things in its Mind and in its light and in its spirit [...] beyond this Mind there is neither angel nor demon nor any other substance, for he is the lord of all things, father and god, source and life and power and light and mind and spirit, and all things are in him and are placed beneath him.

Cyril's interpretation (I. 49) is that the Mind originating from Mind is the Son, like 'light of light' (the parallel to the Nicene Creed is obvious), whereas the spirit that contains all things is the Holy Spirit. If the Hermetic text claims that no angels or demons or other substances exist, it means that there is no other god outside of God.

Again from the *Third Discourse to Asclepius*, it is asked what the Spirit of God is (I. 49 = frag. 24). Here is Cyril's interpretation, in line with fifth-century Trinitarian doctrine:

Thus Hermes knows that the Spirit exists as a personal substance, vivifying each thing and nourishing it and depending on God the Father like on a holy spring. Indeed, the Spirit proceeds from him according to its nature, and through the Son it is given to creation.

Other points of contact between Hermetism and Christian theology follow. *Contra Iulianum* II. 22 contains a brief reference to *CH* XI. 22: God, although invisible, is still always visible in his works, most of all in the awesome works of the world. Regarding the creation of the world, certain Hermetic passages (frags 31, 32a, 32b, 33) are quoted in II. 30–31 that testify to its being a work of God. Three are taken from the book *To Asclepius*, the last from the *Detailed Discourses to Tat*. The cosmogony of the Hermetic texts is similar to that of Genesis, as the creator

¹⁸⁴ This also happens in the sixteenth century. See Foix-Candale, in his commentary to *CH* XV. 10, p. 672: the spirit of life, which is in man, is the Spirit of God. See pp. 231–36.

¹⁸⁵ It is expressed in the form of the revelation of a divine doctrine, which may only be heard by initiates.

god speaks and says: 'Let there be earth and let the firmament appear',¹⁸⁶ and 'Let there be sun'. Cyril himself (II. 31) ascertains the parallelism with the sacred text, noting that Trismegistus introduces a god that speaks to his creatures and orders them to consider as their own law the commandment that has been given to them by his Logos (frag. 34).

In II. 32 Cyril begins a long polemic that continues in the following books. Julian, on the basis of a famous passage of Plato (*Tim.* 41ad), had maintained that the creator god, being the supreme god, had not personally created mankind but had entrusted the task to lesser gods who, in the culture of the Imperial Age, are normally identified by pagans and Christians as demons. Cyril polemicalizes at length with Julian's interpretation. In the first place, he disputes that God created demons, that they would thus need to be considered lesser gods, and, finally, that demons are considered to be the creators of mankind. In fact, according to Christian teaching, man was created directly by God. Nor can one accept what is said by Plato in that passage of the *Timaeus* and is repeated by Julian, namely that gods are destined by their nature to die but that they do not die because the demiurge does not will it; even less so can one accept the notion that God entrusted the task of creating mankind to these corruptible god-demons (II. 41). This is corroborated, Cyril continues (II. 42), by Trismegistus in his discourse to Asclepius, that is, the fourteenth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (XIV. 2): only god and what he has created exist, immortal and mortal being; all creation, however various, is the work of the highest god, not of lesser gods.

Later on (VIII. 920D = frag. 35) Cyril attempts to demonstrate that the doctrine of the Trinity had also already been taught, albeit imprecisely, by the Greek philosophers. The generated must be totally and thoroughly in the generator, since they are not by nature separate but conjoined, and since there is nothing between them; the difference between generator and generated consists only in that the former generates and the latter is generated. After citing a passage of Plotinus (*Enneads* V. 1. 6) that illustrates the intrinsic relationship between generator and generated, Cyril quotes a Hermetic passage concerning god who is the perfect creator:

And indeed, being perfect and wise, god imposed order itself on disorder, such that the intelligent realities, being older and more powerful, preside and have the first place, and the sensible realities, being inferior, were placed beneath them. Thus, that which is heavy and is brought lower than intellectual reality possesses in himself a wise and creating logos, and his logos is united with creative nature, for it is fertile and vivifying.

¹⁸⁶ The words of II. 30 ('the creation of the sun by the Lord of the universe was effected through his holy, creating Logos') are attributed to Cyril himself, and not to Hermes, by Nock and Festugière (frag. 32b).

This passage is also commentated upon by Cyril in a Christian sense (921A):

This Logos is creative by nature, since it is fertile and a giver of life. Indeed, in everything that moves, the Logos of God is present as a giver of life: we, too, affirm it, and Paul says it (Ephesians 4. 6). And it is so, because that which has been born and brought from non-being into being could not contain the necessary subsistence in its being without participating in the incorruptible and truly existing God. But Logos gives the life in the Holy Spirit to everything lacking life.¹⁸⁷

Cyril also contests the validity of pagan sacrifices, which are gory and thus impure, and to this end he draws on Porphyry, who (*De abstinencia* II. 43. 1) had said that the wise and prudent man will abstain from such sacrifices, as there is the danger that they could provoke the assaults of demons; and Cyril, *Contra Iulianum* (PG, 76, 701B) complements Porphyry's statement with one from Hermes, according to whom there is only one defence against the assault of demons: *eusebeia*. We have already encountered this doctrine (above, p. 43), which probably belonged to the *Logos teleios*.

The *Tübingen Theosophy*

The anthology of Hermetic doctrines compiled by Cyril was taken up at the beginning of the sixth century by the anonymous author of the *Tübingen Theosophy*.¹⁸⁸ The reason given for making use of Hermetic doctrine, along with that of other Greek and Egyptian wise men (philosophers, oracles, Sibylline texts) is that those wise men are in agreement with Sacred Scripture; sometimes they speak of the primogenial cause of everything, sometimes they even introduce the most holy Trinity into the unique nature of God (chap. 1). This is the typical explanation given by all Christian writers interested in pagan religious texts.

Sections II. 32–35 and 45–49 contain the same quotations as appear in Cyril (*Contra Iul.* I. 46–49). Thus the author of the *Theosophy* has quite likely drawn his knowledge of philosophical Hermetism from the work of the Bishop of Alexandria, written less than one hundred years earlier. Although it is interesting that Hermetism continued to seem a foretelling of Christian truth even in a sixth-century Christian context (Monophysite, according to Beatrice), these fragments do not tell us anything new.

¹⁸⁷ See John 6. 64; Psalm 32. 6.

¹⁸⁸ I follow the text in the recent edition of P. F. Beatrice (*Anonymi Monophysitae Theosophia*, an attempt at reconstruction by Pier Franco Beatrice (Leiden: Brill, 2001)).

BETWEEN LATIN WEST AND BYZANTINE EAST

In the rich and wide-ranging philosophical production of the Middle Ages, Hermetism takes on a new dimension. It is no longer, as it was in Late Antiquity, a theosophy in which Christian theologians take interest as a source of information and concepts, whose revelation can be utilized but with more or less caution depending on how much it accords (or not) with Christian revelation. Now the figure of Hermes Trismegistus (whose Greek name is Latinized in various ways) takes full part in Christian speculation: it is accepted as a fact that Hermes was able to have anticipated Christian revelation, and studying ancient Hermetic texts to tease out their underlying ideas is even considered a justifiable activity. Importance is attached not only to the philosophical Hermetism whose history we are tracing. A recently published volume of essays has surveyed both ‘authentic’ and ‘reflected’ Hermetism (reflected, that is, in the ‘new’ Hermetic texts of the Middle Ages), alchemical and astrological varieties, and, finally, a tradition related to philosophy and medicine that is now being discovered in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew culture.¹ In the same vein — to cite only recent scholars, who have made a great contribution to our knowledge of this topic — Loris Sturlese has elucidated the presence of Hermetic doctrines in the philosophico-religious culture of thirteenth-century Germany (Albertus Magnus and Berthold of Moosburg),² and Antonella Sannino has examined the philosophical production of England in the same period (Roger Bacon, Thomas Bradwardine, the culture of Oxford in the thirteenth and

¹ *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, ed. by Lucentini, Parri, and Perrone Compagni. Recently also P. Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo, Eresia nel Medioevo*, with a foreword by L. Sturlese (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération Internationale des Instituts d’Etudes Médiévales, 2007).

² L. Sturlese, ‘Proclo ed Ermete in Germania da Alberto Magno a Bertoldo di Moosburg’, in *Von Meister Dietrich zu Meister Eckart*, ed. by Kurt Flasch (Hamburg: Meiner, 1984), pp. 22–33.

fourteenth centuries).³ In conclusion, it could be said that the Middle Ages — no less than the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries — was the true golden age of Hermetic literature, despite the fact that, due to the ‘disappearance’ of Greek, it was necessarily based on only a few late antique texts. It will be the Renaissance that rediscovers the Greek Hermes, just as it rediscovered the Greek Plato in his entirety.

Admittedly, a chapter dedicated to a topic as broad as the philosophical Hermetism of the Middle Ages runs the risk of being impressionistic. It is nevertheless indispensable to our investigation.

In the Latin West

The ‘Renaissance’ of the Twelfth Century and the School of Chartres

As said above, in the Middle Ages the conviction that Christian revelation was preceded by a most ancient form of wisdom — Hermetic wisdom — is reinforced and becomes a *communis opinio*. If Lactantius’s positive attitude towards Hermes was countered in Late Antiquity by a much more authoritative criticism, and therefore the use of Hermetism in theology still needed to be legitimized, starting in the twelfth century Hermes is nearly unanimously considered a precursor of Christ. The sources on which this speculation is based are admittedly few: in sum, the *Asclepius* alone (in the twelfth century the *Asclepius* enjoyed especially intense diffusion, as attested by an increase in manuscripts)⁴ and the testimonies of Lactantius and his epigone Quodvultdeus (although the latter’s *Adversus quinque haereses* was considered a work of Augustine). It might be mentioned that this textual impoverishment can already be observed in Augustine’s times, at which point the Greek Hermetic texts were no longer known in the Latin West. This lack is offset by the first translations of technical *Hermetica* (astrology, magic, alchemy) into Latin from Greek and Arabic and by the composition of new Hermetic texts, like the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, the *Liber de sex rerum principiis*, and the *Liber Alcidi*.

³ A. Sannino, ‘La tradizione ermetica a Oxford nei secoli XIII e XIV: Ruggero Bacone e Tommaso Bradwardine’, *Studi Filosofici*, 18 (1995), 23–57.

⁴ A handlist of these has been supplied by R. Klibansky and F. Regen, *Die Handschriften der philosophischen Werke des Apuleius* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), and later by P. Lucentini and V. Perrone Compagni, ‘I manoscritti dei testi ermetici latini’, in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, ed. by Lucentini, Parri, and Perrone Compagni, pp. 715–45.

In the twelfth century, Abelard and the philosophers of the school of Chartres all demonstrate particular interest in Hermes as a witness to the most ancient wisdom and a harbinger of Christian revelation. Chapter eight of the *Asclepius*, interpreted by Lactantius and Quodvultdeus as testimony about the generation of the Word from God the Father, plays a central role in this renaissance of Hermetism. Abelard takes it up in his *Theologia Christiana* I. 61, attributing Quodvultdeus's consideration of it, as everyone did, to Augustine:

So, first of all we encounter Mercury, that famous, most ancient philosopher of grand repute, who, on account of his excellence was also called a 'god'.⁵ His testimony on the generation of the Word is adduced by Augustine in his *Contra quinque haereses*, where he says [...].⁶

Abelard then cites the passage, although he interprets it with a certain caution. He explains (I. 64) that the *catholici* and sometimes even the doctors of the Church themselves spoke in an inexact (*abusive*) way about this deeply mysterious generation, saying that the Son was 'created' or 'made', instead of 'generated'. An example is provided in *Theologia Christiana* I. 65 and I. 67, where Abelard cites (and the knowledge he possesses of the ancient Christian writers is certainly noteworthy) various passages of certain works by Hilary of Poitiers. On the other hand, he continues (I. 67), Hermes had not been educated in Christian doctrine. An analogous example is furnished by Plato and his followers, who sustained that the mind, which they call *nous*, is born from God and is coeternal with him: this refers, obviously, to the Son. Nor were those ancient philosophers ignorant of the Holy Spirit, either, which they defined as *anima mundi*, the third Person after God and *Nous* (I. 68). And, returning to the difficulty raised by Hermes' terminology, Abelard explains:

Indeed, the philosophers usually say that everything that receives its being from God is 'made' or 'generated' from God. For this reason Hermes also said above that the Son of God was 'made' by God, since he receives his being from him, in the sense that as he was generated eternally, not made or created by him in time.⁷ (I. 70)

⁵ The notion that Hermes was considered a god on account of his wisdom comes from Lactantius, *De ira Dei* 11. 12 and *Epit.* 4. 4.

⁶ Petrus Abaelardus, *Opera theologica II. Theologia christiana. Theologia scholarium (recensiones breviores). Capitula haeresum Petri Abaelardi*, ed. by E. M. Buytaert, CCCM, 12 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969). 'Primus autem nunc ille antiquissimus philosophorum et magni nominis occurrit Mercurius, quem prae excellentia sua deum quoque appellaverunt. Cuius quidem testimonium de generatione Verbi Augustinus *Contra quinque haereses* disputans inducit, dicens [...].'

⁷ 'Solent quippe philosophi "factum" ex Deo sive "genitum" dicere omne quod a Deo habet esse. Unde et Hermes superius Filium Dei factum a Deo dixit, secundum hoc quod ab ipso habet esse tamquam aeternaliter genitus, non temporaliter ab ipso factus aut creatus.'

If, then, Mercury says that the Son is *secundus dominus* after the Father, he means to say two things: that he is a Lord (*dominus*) and that he comes second, after the Father.

That is, in his person he is different from that Father from whom alone he derives; but he is not the only one, since the Holy Spirit also derives from both the one and the other. [...] Therefore he called him 'second', in the sense that he is the first to derive from the Father, namely from the Father's very own substance and with no other Person coming in between.⁸ (I. 101)

This interpretation of the text of *Quodvultdeus* is repeated and augmented in *Theologia Summi boni* III. 58:

It is in this sense that Mercury also says above that 'God made a second Lord', that is, that the Father generated the Son. And he — Mercury that is — as if correcting himself for having said 'made' and not 'generated', later added: 'He loved him like his Only-Begotten Son'; and elsewhere he says: 'Son of the blessed God'. For 'to be created' or 'to be made' are improper expressions, except when referring to something that has a beginning and was made by another, and that did not exist beforehand.⁹

Perhaps, Abelard continues, *creari* can be used interchangeably for *gigni* and *gigni* for *creari*, as is attested by scripture (citations of Proverbs 8. 22 and Ecclesiasticus 1. 4 and 1. 9 follow) and also by Plato. But when Mercury said, 'made a second Lord', he improperly used *fieri* instead of *gigni*.

In this atmosphere, Augustine's criticism of Hermes (which we saw above) does not have much of a following. His interpretation of the so-called 'apocalypse' of the *Asclepius* — which according to him was inspired in Hermes by a demonic power — and his condemnation of the art of creating earthly gods and of the worship of statues, both dangerous forms of magic, will seldom be recalled in the twelfth century. John of Salisbury, for example, when treating the nature of demons and their supposed ability to divine the future, refers to Trismegistus's prophecy about the decline of idolatrous religion (*Policraticus* II. 28). In doing so he follows

⁸ 'Hoc est, personaliter diversum ab eo Patre a quo solo ipse est; sed non solus, cum ipse quoque Spiritus ab utrisque sit. [...] "Secundum" itaque dixit quasi eum qui primo loco ex Patre sit, ex ipsa videlicet eius substantia et nulla alia interveniente Persona.'

⁹ Petrus Abaelardus, *Opera theologica* III. *Theologia 'summi boni'*. *Theologia 'scholarium'*, ed. by E. M. Buytaert and C. J. Mews, CCCM, 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1987). 'Quo etiam modo supra Mercurius ait quod "deus secundum fecit dominum", hoc est pater genuit filium. Qui, scilicet Mercurius, postea quasi corrigendo hoc quod dixit "fecit" et non dixit "genuit", adiecit: "Dilexit eum tamquam unigenitum suum" et alibi: "Filius," inquit, "benedicti Dei." Non enim proprie "creari" vel "fieri" dicitur, nisi id quod incepit et ab alio factum est, cum prius non esset.'

Augustine's interpretation, but he does not mention the condemnation of Hermetic idolatry.¹⁰ Instead it is the exegesis of Lactantius and Quodvultdeus that will make its mark, together with the direct reading of the *Asclepius*. Abelard is responsible for the diffusion of this understanding of Trismegistus; after him, the Egyptian wise man receives more and more attention. It is strange that the issue of Hermes' magic was a much more sensitive problem in the Renaissance, a historical period generally considered to be the triumph of free human thought, than in the 'religious' Middle Ages.

Along with Alan of Lille, Thierry of Chartres is perhaps the most important individual to have used the *Asclepius* in this way to elucidate the dogma of the Trinity.¹¹ His *Tractatus de sex dierum operibus* uses Platonic cosmology to explain the account in Genesis. Thierry does not follow only Christian authorities, as does Abelard; for him Platonic, Stoic, and Hermetic doctrines are equally important for the cosmogony. He proposes two interpretations of the biblical account of creation. In the words of Genesis 1. 2, the 'Spirit of God' that moves above the waters denotes 'the divine, ordering power which dominates matter to give it form and order' (26).¹² In 25, this Spirit is said to be a *virtus artificis operatrix* that has been given various names by the philosophers: for Mercury it is the spirit that operates in matter, for Plato it is the World Soul, for Virgil the breath of life. Thierry makes reference to *Aeneid* VI. 724–31, a passage that continually recurs in discussions on the World Soul;¹³ the doctrine of the World Soul can also be found in Bernardus Silvestris's commentary on the *Aeneid*.¹⁴ In this passage Thierry cites *Asclepius* 14 (which affirms the existence of god and the matter and the spirit that accompanied god and was in the world) and 16–17 (which speaks of the spirit that moves all the sensible things in this world).

Thierry of Chartres and his school draw on the *Asclepius* when commenting on Boethius, thus creating a mixture of Platonism and Hermetism that will live on after them. The philosophy of the twelfth century, as has been noted by Tullio Gregory, takes up the conclusions of late Platonism, affirming the immanence of

¹⁰ See Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, p. 77.

¹¹ See Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, pp. 84–85.

¹² Theodoricus Carnotensis, *Tractatus de sex dierum operibus*, ed. by N. M. Häring (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1971), chap. 26.

¹³ See the observations on p. 67 above.

¹⁴ *The Commentary on the First Six Books of the Aeneid of Virgil, Commonly Attributed to Bernardus Silvestris: A New Critical Edition*, ed. by J. W. Jones and E. F. Jones (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 119, lines 12–13.

the One in multiplicity and at the same time exalting the radical transcendence of the ineffable divine principle.¹⁵ In his *Commentum super Boethii librum de Trinitate*,¹⁶ Thierry considers the Hermetic doctrine of the presence of God in matter (cf. *Ascl.* 14). If it is accepted, he argues, since God cannot be extraneous to anything but, on the contrary, everything is in God, the inevitable conclusion is that God is everything, as can be read in *Asclepius* 1. 2. 9. But this is unacceptable:

In the same way the sophistic proposition is disproved according to which it must be concluded that god is wood or stone once we concede that god is all things. But this is what Mercury says in the *Trimegistrus*,¹⁷ where he affirms and explains that all things are one.¹⁸ (Thierry, IV. 3. 8, p. 97. 88–90)

Thierry also considers another central doctrine of the *Asclepius* (chaps 20 and 31), one which will be very widely diffused: that God possesses all names and is, at the same time, without names, since he is unknowable. This is said many times in the *Lectiones in Boethii librum de Trinitate* (IV. 6. 11, pp. 189. 22–190. 32; IV. 28, p. 195. 32–35) and in the *Glosa super Boethii librum De Trinitate* (II. 31, p. 275. 7–10): ‘God cannot have a name, and all this is attested by Mercury in his book entitled *Trimegistrus*.’ And it is brought up again in the *Commentarius in Boethii librum contra Eutychen et Nestorium (Fragmentum Londinense)* (III. 45, p. 243. 68–74). Let it suffice to cite *Lectiones* IV. 28 (p. 195. 32–35):

Thus Mercury says in the *Trimegistrus* that god is unintelligible, infinite, boundless, and above all comprehension.¹⁹

For this reason Thierry observes (*Glosa* IV. 11, p. 286. 74–76) (mingling, incidentally, two discrete elements of the episode related in Acts 17: the existence of the altar to the unknown god, and the pagan — Stoic and Epicurean — philosophers who were present at Paul’s speech in Athens):

¹⁵ T. Gregory, ‘The Platonic Inheritance’, in *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy*, ed. by P. Dronke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 74–76.

¹⁶ Citations are from *Commentary on Boethius by Thierry of Chartres and his School*, ed. by N. M. Häring, S.A.C. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1971).

¹⁷ The use of the term implies that this title is meant as the title of a book.

¹⁸ ‘Eodem modo igitur illatio refellitur sophistica si quis deum lignum esse concludat vel lapidem eo quod ipsum esse concedimus omnia. Quod quidem in *Trimegistro* Mercurius asserit, ubi omnia unum esse confirmat et astruit.’

¹⁹ ‘Unde Mercurius in *Trimegistro* dicit quod deus intelligibilis est, infinibilis, interminabilis, super omnem intellectum.’

And Mercury attests to all this in that book entitled *Trimegistrus*. Hence the pagan philosophers had raised an altar 'to the unknown god', by which they meant that God whose identity is unable to be known.²⁰

Another theme typical of the Platonic and Hermetic tradition, that of 'becoming similar to God', is taken up by Thierry's school. When describing the faculties of the soul, the *Glosa super Boethii librum De Trinitate* uses Mercury's authority to affirm that

when the soul, with great effort, aspires to the simple totality of unions (to the extent that it can keep its spirit suspended, intent on non-comprehension), it indeed transcends its own capacities and, as Mercury affirms [cf. *Ascl.* 6], even becomes God.²¹ (II. 10, p. 270. 62–64)

Hermann of Carinthia was a pupil of Thierry with an interest in the *Asclepius*.²² In his *De essentiis*, Hermann states (II. 73B–E) that there are four types of rational and incorporeal spirits: angels, the spirits of the planets, human souls, and demons. Demons live in the tempests of the sublunary world, which place is called 'infernal' because it is below the higher regions. Let us recall in this regard that Virgil's Neoplatonic interpretation (in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*) already placed the Elysian Fields in the heavens, instead of underground, since in that way our world would constitute the 'infernal' world proper. Such was Macrobius's explanation (*Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* I. 11. 8–9): according to a division of the world proposed by *aliqui*, the earth must be understood as the 'unmoving sphere where antiquity would have us believe the Elysian Fields, the home of pure souls, are located'.²³ It would be worthwhile to try to trace the lines of this concept. It is found, for example, in Bernardus Silvestris, *Cosmographia* II. v. 20.

Furthermore, Hermann draws on Augustine's interpretation of the *Asclepius*, attributing the invention of idolatrous worship to demons, ancestors of Trimegistus and Asclepius; nevertheless (and no doubt in a seemingly contradictory way), he does not follow Augustine's condemnation of Trimegistus's idolatry. Thus he appeals to the *Asclepius* when discussing topics of astrology and natural philosophy, such as the power of the sun and the moon over creations (I. 65^v: 'Trimegistus

²⁰ 'Et hoc totum testatur Mercurius in eo libro qui inscribitur *Trimegistrus*. Hinc est etiam quod gentiles philosophi aram constituerant *ignoto deo*, hunc attendentes de quo quis sit sciri non potest.'

²¹ 'At vero cum ad simplicem universitatem unionum vix aspirat [scl. anima], quantum tamen potest suspendit animum in inintelligibilitatem erectum, profecto se ipsa super se utitur fitque etiam iuxta Mercurium deus.'

²² As has been emphasized by Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, pp. 78–79, 90–91.

²³ 'sphaera aplanis, in qua Elysios esse campos puris animis deputatos antiquitas nobis intellegendum reliquit'.

makes life derive from the sun, the growth of the creation from the moon'; cf. *Ascl.* 3, where it is said that the world, sensible god, administers all bodies, whose growth and diminution are the mutual work of the sun and the moon). According to Hermann, the *Asclepius* (chap. 9) is also the source for the doctrine of the divine character of music, which imitates the supreme harmony of the spheres and is man's most beautiful gift to the celestial gods.

Hermann also draws on the *Asclepius* (chap. 38) in *De essentiis* II. 73^r. The sensible nature of the spirits that inhabit the planets is explained with the passage on the generation of the world (which is *deus sensibilis*), the passage famously interpreted by Lactantius as referring to the generation of the Word (see *Ascl.* 8):

All these things mean, then, that they are sensible, not, as Trismegistus explains, because they are subjected to our senses, but because they strike our senses, or because they are themselves sentient.²⁴ (*De essentiis* II. 72^v)

Hermann of Carinthia, then, does not seem to take up the interpretation of the Trinity offered in this Hermetic passage, which had, at any rate, become quite diffused.

In conclusion, 'Hermann, like Augustine before him, distinguishes the Trismegistus and the Asclepius of the Hermetic dialogue from their mythical forefathers; and it is to the latter that he attributes the art of making gods, the calling forth and enclosing in statues of the spirits that cause good and evil in temples and among men. But even if he knows Augustine's criticism, Hermann does not take up the accusation of impiety against Trismegistus.'²⁵

Bernardus Silvestris

Much has been written about Bernardus Silvestris, a writer characteristic of the culture of his time, and also about his engagement with Hermetism. He was a friend of Thierry of Chartres, to whom he dedicated his *Cosmographia*, written in 1145–48. Scholars have already noted certain Hermetic elements in the *Cosmographia*:²⁶ the existence of shapeless matter, which is neither good nor evil (it is as

²⁴ 'Hec igitur omnia signo sunt sensibiles esse, nec, ut Trimegistus exponit, quod sensibus nostris subiaceant, sed quia sensus nostros incurrant seu quia ipsi sentiant.'

²⁵ Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, p. 79.

²⁶ R. B. Woolsey, 'Bernard Silvester and the Hermetic Asclepius', *Traditio*, 6 (1948), 340–44; P. Lucentini, 'L'*Asclepius* ermetico nel secolo XII', in Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, pp. 92–93; Winthrop Wetherbee in the notes to his edition of the *Cosmographia: The Cosmographia of*

fertile for bearing good things as it is *ad malum indifferens*) (I. II. 6 = *Ascl.* 15); the celebration of the beauty of creation (I. II. 11 = *Ascl.* 3); the heavens as giver of life to all beings (I. IV. 1 = *Ascl.* 2–3. 19); the continuity of the universe (I. IV. 9 = *Ascl.* 2–3); the distinction between eternity and time and the continuous passing from one to the other (I. IV. 11–12 = *Ascl.* 31); the fertility of sex, which imitates divine fertility and is a product of God's design (II. XIV. 157–64 = *Ascl.* 21).

It has also been observed that Bernardus takes up the passage of the *Asclepius* (chap. 19) relating to the hierarchy of the *ousiarchai*, or intelligible gods,²⁷ although with a different meaning from that of the Hermetic author. Let us quote a few passages in their entirety:

Therefore, in this omniform place, a god appeared to us, venerable in appearance and in the guise of decrepit old age. *Oyarses* was there, a spirit devoted to art and to the work of the painter and sculptor. Indeed, in the world below, the whole aspect of things conforms to the heavens [...]. So, *Oyarses* associates and attributes all the forms to all the things in that circle that Greece calls *pantomorphon*, Latinity 'omniform'.²⁸ (II. III. 11)

After that place, but at a point much lower, there was *Oyarses* Saturn, an old man harshly accused of every wrong.²⁹ (II. V. 5)

The principal one is *Oyarses* (I could call him *Plutonium* or *Summanus*, because, as the highest of the *manes*, he sets the boundaries of his empire and kingdom beginning right at the circle of the moon).³⁰ (II. VII. 12)

Oyarses is so favorable to this region [scilicet *Iuppiter*], so benevolent, that Latinity called him 'Jove' — from the verb *iuvare*, to help.³¹ (II. V. 8)

Bernardus Silvestris, trans. with intro. and notes by Wetherbee (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990). Citations are to Bernardus Silvestris, *Cosmographia*, ed. with intro. and notes by P. Dronke (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

²⁷ See above, pp. 64–65.

²⁸ 'Hoc igitur in loco pantomorpha, persona deus venerabili, et decrepitae sub imagine senectutis, occurrit. Illic Oyarses idem erat et genius, in artem et officium pictoris et figurantis addictus. In subteriacente enim mundo rerum facies universa celum sequitur [...]. Oyarses igitur circuli, quem pantomorpha Grecia, Latinitas nominat Omniformem, formas rebus omnes omnibus et associat et ascribit.'

²⁹ 'Eo ex loco, multa tamen depressione inferius, Oyarses erat Saturnus, accusatissimus veteranus.'

³⁰ 'Precipuus est Oyarses Plutonium dixerim vel Summanus, quia — summus manium — a lunari iam circulo imperii regnique sui latitudine ordiatur.'

³¹ 'Huius regionis Oyarses adeo presens, adeo benivolus, ut eum Latinitas Iovem nominet — a iuvando.'

Among the *Oyarsas* and the celestial spirits that eternal Wisdom assigned to the beauty and the government of the world, the sun [...] filled everything with light.³² (V. v. 13)

Oyarses, then, seems to be the name of a certain class of spirits.

Other elements deriving from the *Asclepius*, in addition to those which have already been noted by scholars, include the following. Man is capable of worshiping the gods and of governing the earth (cf. *Ascl.* 6 and 8):

He will take his mind from the heavens, his body from the elements,
so that he may inhabit the earth with his body and the heavens with his mind.
Mind and body, although distinct, will be joined into one,
such that this holy union will result in a work pleasing to God.
He will be divine, he will be earthly, he will take care of both things,
the world with his thoughts, the gods with religion.
Thus he will be able to correspond to his two natures,
and thus be in harmony with his elementary principles.³³ (II. x. 14–22)

Man possesses the *status rectus* necessary for contemplating the heavens and making sure that their rational laws constitute a model (*exemplar*) for his life (II. iv. 29–32). He will be able to know the causes of things (35–50), and after death he will ascend to the heavens (51–54).

In the realm of theology, God is *summus et superessentialis* (II. v. 1), *summus et exsuperantissimus* (II. ii. 13, as is said in *Ascl.* 41). Other rare words from the *Asclepius* (chap. 26), such as *primipotens* (II. vi. 10, II. xiv. 2), are also found in the *Cosmographia*.

Next to God is the divine intellect (*noys*): it contains the divine ideas, which are visible in the world, as is stated in *Asclepius* 17 ('per formas enim solas specierum, quarum imaginibus videtur insculpta — sc. mundi rotunditas — quasi visibilis creditur'):

The intellect, always pregnant with God's will, thus gave form to the *endelechia* by means of the exemplars of the divine ideas, which it carries within itself.³⁴ (I. iv. 14)

³² 'Inter Oyarsas Geniosque celestas quos eternal sapientia mundane vel decori vel regimini deputavit, Sol [...] perfuderat universa.'

³³ 'Mentem de celo, corpus trahet ex elementis, | ut terras habitet corpore, mente polum. | Mens, corpus — diversa licet — iungentur ad unum, | Ut sacra conplacitum nexio reddat opus. | Divus erit, terrenus erit, curabit utrumque, | Consiliis mundum, religione deos. | Naturis poterit sic respondere duabus | Et sic principiis congruus esse suis.'

³⁴ 'Sicut enim divinae semper voluntatis est praegnans, sic exemplis aeternarum quas gestat imaginum noys endelechiam [...] informavit.'

The intellect has the name of *sensus*, as was seen in *Asclepius* 7: 'spirit and thought and profound mind, i.e. *noys*' (I. III).

The *uniformis spiritus* is found in the world (II. v. 2).

The whole will of God is goodness (I. IV. 6 = *Ascl.* 20).

The sensible world was born from the intelligible world, *perfectus ex perfecto* (I. IV. 11; II. X. 9–10: 'this sensible world, an image of the better world, | so that it may be filled with its parts, its parts also full').

Eternity is connected to *imarmene*. '*Imarmene*, which is the duration of time but which provides for order, arranges, weaves together, and undoes all the things that it embraces' (I. IV. 14: cf. *Ascl.* 39); it is a *fatalis series* (I. II. 13: cf. *Ascl.* 39).

Matter is described thus: '*hyle* was already available (to the Creator), it was available in matter, it was available in the Spirit endowed with eternal life' (II. IV. 8).

It seems quite likely that, in addition to the *Asclepius*, the philosopher Apuleius is also present in the *Cosmographia*. The eternal mind, in which the ideas are found, is the *speculum providentiae*, that is, the mirror that reflects providence (providence is the reflection of the providential activity of the Son of God); in it is found the *sensus profundissimus*, that is, the divine Intellect (II. XI. 4). As the Christian Platonists of Late Antiquity affirmed, it is the Son who created the world: he is *rerum genitor extortorque omnium*, an expression that derives from Apuleius (*De Platone* I. 5. 190). The manuscripts of Apuleius also concur in reading *extortor*, which I, along with Beaujeu, corrected to *exstructor*, following a conjecture of Oudendorp. In light of Bernardus's text, Apuleius's ought to be reconsidered.³⁵

God, defined (as seen above) as *summus et superessentialis* or *summus et exsuperantissimus*, is also *extramundanus* (I. III. 12), called *ultramundanus* by Apuleius (*Plat.* I. 11. 204) (*extramundanus* is also found in Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus* V. III, PL, 210, col. 531A; IV, col. 532D; VII, col. 536D). For its part, *exsuperantissimus* is another term from Apuleius's philosophical works, from *De mundo* (27. 350) to be precise.

Bernardus employs the term *medioximus* to denote angels (II. v. 2, II. VII. 3, II. VII. 11); it is so rare that it has almost certainly been taken from Apuleius (it is an ancient word, found in Plautus, in Apuleius, *Plat.* I. 11. 204, and in Servius, *In Vergilii Aeneidos libros commentarii* III. 234. VIII. 175). Moreover, Apuleius's general demonology, expounded in his *De deo Socratis*, is not unknown to Bernardus Silvestris. Angels, he says, do not die but rather take part in the divine nature of the

³⁵ Apulei Platonici Madaurensis, *De philosophia libri*, ed. by Claudio Moreschini (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1991); Apulée, *Opuscules philosophiques et Fragments*, ed., trans., and comm. by J. Beaujeu (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1973).

stars ('participant cum siderum divinitate', I. VII. 4); but they are moved by the passions, and thus they participate in human nature (II. VII. 3). Angels carry the favours of God to men and the *obsequia* of men to God. Therefore the term 'angel' is a name that indicates an activity, not a nature ('officii nomen est, non naturae', II. VII. 6). The 'guardian angel' of Christian doctrine is called a *genius*: he is united with man from the moment of birth (II. VII. 8).

Alan of Lille

It comes as no surprise that the other great figure of the twelfth century, Alan of Lille, with his many-sided interests in literature and philosophy, also engaged deeply with Hermetism.³⁶ Mercury, despite being a pagan philosopher, provides him with arguments for explicating theology and polemicizing against heretics. Consequently, Hermes is an important *auctoritas* in his *Summa quoniam homines* and *Contra hereticos*, and he is cited explicitly.

The following Hermetic doctrines appear in the *Summa quoniam homines*.³⁷ In I. 4, to demonstrate the oneness of God (treated in 3a), the final prayer of the *Asclepius* is cited: 'nomen unum quo unus solus Deus es benedicendus religione paterna'. The phrase *unus solus Deus* means that Alan identifies the God of the *Asclepius* with the Christian God. God is, however, *omninominis* (I. 9, p. 139 = *Ascl.* 20). It is not known what God is (I. 8e, p. 135), according to what is said in *Asclepius* 31: 'hoc ergo quod tale est (Deus) [...] incertum est'. Consequently

it is no surprise, then, if the creator, whose immensity is enclosed by no limit, is the efficient cause of each and every thing, that which makes them all exist and preserves their being. This is supported by the authority of Mercury, which we cited above.³⁸ (*Summa* I. 125b; cf. *Ascl.* 31)

It was not God who created evil (*Summa* I. 6b, p. 133 = *Ascl.* 16):

³⁶ Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, pp. 95–99; D. Porreca, 'La Réception d'Hermès Trismégiste par Alain de Lille et ses contemporains', in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, ed. by Lucentini, Parri, and Perrone Compagni, pp. 139–55.

³⁷ Citations to P. Glorieux, 'La Somme *Quoniam homines* d'Alain de Lille', *Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 28 (1953), 113–360.

³⁸ 'Non est ergo mirum si creator, cuius immensitas nullo termine clauditur, sit in qualibet re tamquam efficiens causa earumdem que et eas esse facit et in esse conservat. Ad idem adminiculatur auctoritas Mercurii superius posita.'

God did not envy man, but was provident to him in a rational way. This was not unknown to the pagan philosopher Mercury, who says in the *Trimegistus*: 'Many say: could not God have [...] removed and eliminated evil' — that is, the possibility of sin — 'from nature?'³⁹

In fact, worldly evil has a positive function, since it serves to stimulate man's innate gifts.

Other concepts taken from the *Asclepius* are the following. Trismegistus taught the difference between *species*, which is mortal, and *genus*, which is immortal (I. 6, p. 132 = *Ascl.* 4). The void does not exist (*Summa* I. 16a, p. 157 = *Ascl.* 33); in *Summa* I. 95, p. 236, when speaking of the power and the will of the father, Alan states: 'likewise, the pagan philosopher Mercury says: his will is followed by its fulfillment' (*Ascl.* 8).⁴⁰

Certain passages bear a gloss written by Alan:

God created a bodily creature so that the crown of the just man would be greater, if he behaved well in a vessel of mud, and so that it would not be believed impossible for an uncreated spirit to be united *per gratiam* with a created spirit, if the soul is united to the body by nature. The philosopher Mercury also adds a third cause: that he would have greater enjoyment of earthly bodies if he were similar to them in a part of his nature and perfected them to a greater extent, so that the unpolished nature of bodies would not result in confusion.⁴¹ (*Summa* II. 132, p. 271; cf. *Ascl.* 10)

The immortality of the soul is also affirmed with reference to Hermes:

Mercury says in the *Asclepia* [chap. 2]: 'Indeed, every soul is immortal' [...] Likewise, in the *Asclepia* [chap. 28] Mercury says that souls that in life did not want to believe in words, after death are forced to believe in punishments.⁴² (*Contra hereticos* I. 30, *PL* 210, 332CD–333A)

In the *Anticlaudianus* (II. 344–46, 359–60) Alan introduces *Phronesis*, who

³⁹ 'Non fuit ergo Deus homini invidens, sed ei rationabiliter providens. Quod vero gentilem philosophum Mercurium non latuit, qui in Trimegisto ait: "A multis dicitur: non poterat deus avertere atque incidere a rerum natura maliciam", id est potestatem peccandi?' Lucentini has justly observed that the two readings rejected by Glorieux, *atque* and *vestri*, are in reality correct and correspond to the original text of the *Asclepius*.

⁴⁰ 'Item gentilis philosophus Mercurius ait: voluntatem eius comitatur effectus.'

⁴¹ 'Aliam [scl. creaturam] vero creavit corpoream, ut maior redderetur corona homini iusto si bene se haberet in vase luteo et ut non crederetur impossibile spiritum increatum uniri creato per gratiam, si anima unitur corpori per naturam. Mercurius philosophus tertiam adiungit causam, ut terrenorum corporum maiorem delectum haberet si eis in parte nature consimilis esset et ita magis ea excoleret ne natura corporum inculta in confusionem rediret.'

⁴² 'Ait Mercurius in *Asclepia*: Omnis enim immortalis est anima' [...]. Item Mercurius in *Asclepia* ait quod animae post dissolutionem coguntur credere penis que in vita noluerunt credere verbis.'

Speaks like Fabius, orates like Cicero himself,
 thinks like the philosopher of Samos, is wise like Plato, investigates like Hermes, [...] completes the thoughts of Mercury.⁴³

The *Summa* and the *Contra hereticos* take up the exegesis of Lactantius and Quodvultdeus relating to the generation (called ‘making’ by Hermes) of the Son of God. To avoid the defects of Hermes’ expression, Alan proposes a different interpretation in his reading of the *Asclepius*, and he can do so insofar as he does not consider the *Asclepius* to be the *Logostileos* (as he and others called it), that is, the Greek *Logos teleios*. Following Abelard’s interpretation, Alan in his *Summa* (I. 16b) says that the philosophers came to know the invisible mysteries of God by observing the visible world⁴⁴ (and thus they knew them as if through a haze), and they glimpsed, although only in dreams, the signs of the Trinity. They saw that certain essential peculiarities exist in God — power, wisdom, and love — and that these substantial peculiarities define the divine Persons; if they did not know how to distinguish them with suitable concepts, they nevertheless said many things regarding God, his Intellect, and the World Soul that can refer to the three Persons. But Augustine says that the philosophers lacked knowledge of the Holy Spirit; actually, they held many concepts about the World Soul that can be applied to the Spirit.⁴⁵ According to Alan’s text:

But perhaps [the philosophers] said more things that can be adapted to the Father and the Son than can be attributed to the Holy Spirit. Of the Father and the Son, Mercury says in his book called *Logostileos*, i.e. *Perfect Word*: ‘God made a second God and loved him like his Only-Begotten Son.’ And elsewhere he calls him ‘son of his benignity’.⁴⁶ Likewise in his book entitled *Asclepia* [chap. 23], he says: ‘God made eternal gods.’ Whom does he call gods, if not the Son and the Holy Spirit, who derive from the Father, the one by generation, the other by procession? But nevertheless, in a typical pagan lapse, he says ‘gods’. Indeed, the word ‘gods’ is used as an adjective, in the sense of ‘divine’. This is like in the Book of Genesis: where we have ‘God created’, the Hebrew reads ‘eloyim’, which is the plural of this name ‘el’; and ‘eloyim’ has the same meaning for the Greeks as ‘gods’ does for us. But ‘gods’ is used as an attribute, in the place of ‘divine’. Nor should it seem strange if Mercury uses ‘made’ instead of ‘generated’ or ‘produced the spirit’, since even in the Book of Wisdom, wisdom, that is, the Son of God, is said to have been ‘created’. Likewise,

⁴³ Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus*, ed. by R. Bossuat (Paris: Vrin, 1955). ‘Ut Fabius loquitur, ut Tullius ipse perorat, | ut Samius sentit, sapit ut Plato, quaerit ut Hermes [...] adimplet | Mercurii sensus.’

⁴⁴ With these words, Alan takes up the Pauline affirmation of Romans 1. 20–21.

⁴⁵ See Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, pp. 96–99.

⁴⁶ That is, the famous passage in Lactantius, which we saw above, p. 45.

another philosopher says: the monad generates the monad and reflects its flame on itself.⁴⁷ That is, the Father generated the Son, which means that the Holy Spirit is also of the same nature as the Father and the Son.⁴⁸ (*Summa* I. 31, p. 168)

The same considerations on the passages of the *Asclepius* and the *Logostileos* are found in the *Contra hereticos* III. 3 (PL, 210, cols 404D–405A).

Alan thus finds in the *Logostileos*, which he interprets after the manner of Quodvultdeus (that is, according to the ideas of Lactantius), explicit testimony about the Son of God, and he believes that in that work Hermes intuited the dogma of the Trinity. Such is confirmed by the *Sermo de sphaera intelligibili*, where another interesting quotation crops up:

In the book called *Logostileos*, Hermes Mercury says: ‘Oh Asclepius, we declare that there are three eternal gods, the first of which is derived from nothing, the second from the first, and the third from both.’ Augustine, reconsidering these words in his book *Against the Five Heresies*, says: ‘Oh, how finely Hermes Mercury would have spoken about the Trinity if he had not, lapsing into the language of the pagans, said “god”.’⁴⁹

Here Alan explains the derivation of the Spirit following the formula of the *Filioque*, that is, of the origin of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son, which had become official doctrine for the Western Church. Unfortunately, he continues, Hermes expressed himself in a faulty way, typical of the uncircumcized (i.e. the pagans), using the plural ‘gods’ (*deos*), whereas God is one alone; he should have

⁴⁷ As we shall soon see, this is the first sentence of the *Book of the Twenty-Four Philosophers*.

⁴⁸ ‘Sed forte plura dixerunt que possunt adaptari Patri et Filio quam que possunt attribui Spiritui sancto. De Patre et Filio ait Mercurius in libro qui dicitur *Logostileos*, id est *verbum perfectum*: “deus secundum fecit deum et eum dilexit tamquam unigenitum filium suum”. Et alibi vocat eum “filium benignitatis sue”. Item in libro qui inscribitur *Asclepia* ait: “deus deos fecit eternos”. Quos vocat deos, nisi Filium et Spiritum sanctum qui a Patre sunt, alter per generationem, alter per processionem? Sed tamen incircumcisi lapsu dixit “deos”. Ponitur enim “deos” adiective, aut pro “divinos”, sicut in libro Geneseos, ubi nos habemus “creavit deus”, in hebraeo habetur “eloym”, quod est pluralis huius nominis “el” et valet “eloym” apud Graecos quantum “dii” apud nos. Sed “dii” ponitur adiective pro “divini”. Nec mirandum si “fecit” sumitur apud Mercurium pro “genuit” vel “spiravit”, cum et in libro Sapientiae dicatur “sapientia”, id est Filius Dei, “creata”. Item alius philosophus ait: “Monas gignit monadem et in se suum reflectit ardorem”, id est Pater genuit Filium ita quod Spiritus sanctus est eiusdem nature cum Patre et Filio.’

⁴⁹ Citation from Alain de Lille, *Textes inédits*, ed. by M. Th. D’Alverny (Paris: Vrin, 1965), pp. 297–306 (p. 306). ‘Hermes Mercurius in libro qui dicitur *Logostileos* ait: O Asclepi, tres deos profiteamur eternos, primus a nullo, secundus a primo, tertius ab utroque; cuius verba retractans Augustinus in libro contra V hereses ait: O quam eleganter Hermes Mercurius de Trinitate esset locutus, nisi incircumciso lapsu sermonis diceret: deus.’

said, if anything, *personae*. Alan follows Abelard's position, namely that all men have a natural knowledge of the Trinity. Abelard is again the source of Alan's Christian reading of authorities like Mercury, Plato, and other philosophers, whose linguistic improprieties he seeks to explain by demonstrating, with examples taken from scripture, that even certain Christian writers had expressed themselves unsuitably (cf. *Theol. Summi boni* III. 55).

In conclusion, Alan bases his affirmation that the doctrine of the Trinity was already known to Hermes (*deus deos fecit aeternos*) precisely on a passage of the *Asclepius* (chap. 23) — the one in which *men* are said to create gods — that Augustine (*De civitate Dei* VIII. 23) had bitterly condemned.⁵⁰

The *Glosae super Trismegistum*

Further proof of the diffusion of the *Asclepius* in this period is provided by the existence of an anonymous commentary on it, discovered by Lucentini in a thirteenth-century manuscript held in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Ottob. lat. 811).⁵¹ This commentary, entitled *Glosae super Trismegistum*, has been handed down incomplete; it contains only the introduction and the interpretation of the first four chapters of the *Asclepius*. Its object is to highlight the agreement between the *Asclepius* and Christian revelation. To summarize, more than any other philosopher, it is Plato who, in his *Timaeus*, expresses the truths of Hermes: the unity of the cosmos, the elements, the incomprehensibility of God, the immortality of the soul. Plato and Hermes, then, are superior to all the other philosophers, Aristotle included (thus the agreement between Plato and Hermes, which will later be developed especially on Marsilio Ficino's initiative, begins to be substantiated). Mercury and Hermes reaffirm the unity of the universe. Mercury's importance comes to the fore above all in his contact with Christian revelation. Hermes' reputation is owed to the fact that he, more than all the philosophers, meditated on the supercelestial mysteries. As was argued previously by Alan of Lille, in the *Logostileos* Mercury surpassed the other philosophers because he was able to arrive at Christian truths relating to the Father and the Son. And also in his other book, which we have in hand and which is entitled 'Mercury's Trimegistrus', there are

⁵⁰ See Lucentini, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, pp. 98–99.

⁵¹ The text was published by Lucentini himself with a reliable introduction as "Glosae super Trismegistum": Un commento medievale all'*Asclepius* ermetico', *Archives d'Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 62 (1995), 189–293, repr. in *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, pp. 107–222.

many doctrines in harmony with scripture, such as faith in one lone Creator God and the presence of grace in the human soul. Thus this author also distinguished the *Logostileos*, which he knew from Lactantius and Quodvultdeus, from the *Asclepius*, the text on which he was commenting. It was especially in its Trinitarian theology that the commentator, like Alan of Lille before him, described the prophetic announcement of the full truth of revelation. The significance of the *Asclepius* consists in

knowledge of the one God, and in speculation about his power, wisdom, and benignity, such that from this knowledge we can show awe to him who is powerful, intelligence to him who is wise, and the sentiment of love to him who is benign.⁵² (chap. 6)

Here, then, we find foreshadowed Ficino's motivation for giving the subtitle *de potestate et sapientia Dei* to his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, whereas the *Asclepius* (again according to Ficino) was the Hermetic text dedicated to investigating the *voluntas Dei*.⁵³

It is also significant that the author of the *Glosae* takes up Alan's interpretation of the eternal gods, seeing in the Hermetic text the revelation of the divine unity and trinity:

Nevertheless, we can say that by 'gods' Mercury understands the three Persons, but that he lapses into pagan language, and thus that the plurality of which he speaks refers not to a plurality of gods, but rather to a plurality of Persons. Therefore, when he speaks of the 'genus of gods', he means the divine essence of the three Persons, which is called a 'genus' both because it possesses a common being and because it is immortal. For this reason Hilary also calls this essence a 'genus'.⁵⁴ (chap. 87)

New Hermetic Doctrines

The Liber Alcidi

The *Liber Alcidi de immortalitate animae* is by all accounts an enigmatic writing. Knowledge of it was limited and cursory until the middle of the last century;

⁵² 'unius Dei cognitio, eiusque potentia, sapientie et benignitatis speculatio, ut ex hac cognitione potenti exhibeamus timorem, sapienti intelligentiam, benigno dilectionis affectum'.

⁵³ This will be discussed again below, p. 134.

⁵⁴ 'Possumus tamen dicere quod Mercurius per deos intelligit tres personas, incircumciso tamen lapsus sermone, ut pluralitas illa non referatur ad pluralitatem deorum, sed potius ad pluralitatem personarum. Per genus ergo deorum intellegitur divina essentia trium Personarum, que genus dicitur et propter sui communitatem et propter sui immortalitatem; unde et Hilarius eam genus vocat.'

then it received profound study at the hands of Eugenio Garin, who highlighted the presence in it of certain Neoplatonic doctrines, modified in the Middle Ages.⁵⁵ The work has recently received a sound critical edition and has been the object of a careful study by Paolo Lucentini.⁵⁶ Reconsidering the doctrines of late antique Latin Neoplatonism that it contains, together with others of a more traditional nature (going back to Cicero), Lucentini traces it to the milieu of Richard of Saint Victor's theological writings, and more precisely to his *De Trinitate*, written between 1162 and 1173.⁵⁷

The *Liber Alcidi* contains the account of an episode that remained well known but that was utterly invented: the death of Trismegistus, and the philosophical advice he gave to his friends to keep them from suffering on account of his loss. This episode would remain well known even later: it is mentioned and translated into the Florentine vernacular by Tommaso Benci, in Ficino's circle,⁵⁸ and Francesco Patrizi mentions it again.⁵⁹ The scene of the death of Hermes (*Hermes Temegistus*) is modelled by the medieval author (II. 15) on the death of Cyrus the Great, which is narrated in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* and was rendered in Latin by Cicero at the end of his *Cato maior* (chaps 79–81). The author then compares the death of Hermes with that of Socrates, and his teaching on the immortality of the soul with that of Plato in the *Phaedrus*, which portrays the return of Er from the dead (there is obvious confusion with the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, where this episode is narrated).

Common opinion felt the greatest admiration for Hermes Temegistus, and it therefore attributed to him 'immemeritos⁶⁰ deitatis honores' (II. 15).⁶¹

In another passage (IV. 11), when distinguishing between the various kinds of virtue, the author observes with regard to wisdom (*prudentia*) that

Wisdom, then, is found in the first genus of virtues. It is the very knowledge of God, which the divine philosopher Plato, when he wanted, called *nous*, that is, 'intellect' (*mens*); but we,

⁵⁵ E. Garin, *Studi sul platonismo medievale* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1958), pp. 89–151.

⁵⁶ *Liber Alcidi de immortalitate animae*, ed. by P. Lucentini (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1984).

⁵⁷ *Liber Alcidi*, ed. by Lucentini, p. xcix.

⁵⁸ Mentioned by Garin, *Studi sul platonismo medievale*, p. 91, and transcribed by him on pp. 148–49; see also *Liber Alcidi*, ed. by Lucentini, pp. xlii–xliii.

⁵⁹ See p. 271.

⁶⁰ Should *immemeritos* perhaps be corrected to *meritos*, in order for the statement to be more coherent?

⁶¹ *Liber Alcidi*, ed. by Lucentini, p. 47.

following Hermes Temegistus, more often call it 'Son', since it is in him that the similarity of the glory of the Father is first brightly reflected.⁶²

The reference to Trismegistus probably derives from the passage of the *Adversus quinque haereses* (of Quodvultdeus-Augustine) that we have encountered many times. And the doctrine of wisdom, which is identified a bit arbitrarily with the Son of God,⁶³ demonstrates significant similarities with Abelard, *Theologia Christiana* I. 68 and I. 70, which we saw above.

The Liber de sex rerum principiis

Another Hermetic 'forgery' is the *Liber de sex rerum principiis*, in the preface to which, among other things, is said:

We read in the ancient histories of the men inspired by God that there were three philosophers, of whom the first was Enoch, who was called both 'Hermes' and by another name, 'Mercury'; the second was Noah, who was likewise called 'Hermes' and 'Mercury'; and the third was Hermes Mercury, who was called 'Thrice-Great,' because he flourished as a king, a philosopher, and a prophet.⁶⁴ (p. 1. 3–17)

The idea of the three Hermes likely derives from Arab thought, as Delp observes.⁶⁵ Yet we know that the identification of Hermes with Enoch is also found in Hebraic Hermetism. Furthermore, the distinction between the most ancient Mercury and Trismegistus is already mentioned by Augustine (see p. 76). Finally, the explanation of the name *Mercurius Triplex* corresponds to a question which was frequently posed and to which various, analogous answers were given.

The Book of the Twenty-Four Philosophers

Much more famous is the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, a collection of definitions of God stated by twenty-four wise men, each of which is complemented

⁶² 'In primo igitur genere virtutum prudentia est ipsa divina notitia, quam quotiens voluit divinus Plato philosophus noyn, mentem videlicet, nuncupavit; nos vero, Hermetem Temegistum secuti, Filium, ut puta in quo prima paterne glorie similitudo refulget, frequentius appellamus.'

⁶³ The argument is about wisdom as a virtue, but the writer shifts suddenly to Wisdom as a divine hypostasis.

⁶⁴ Hermetis Trismegisti, *De sex rerum principiis*, ed. by Paolo Lucentini and Mark D. Delp, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis, 142 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006). 'Legimus in veteribus divinorum historiis tres fuisse philosophos, quorum primus Enoch, qui et Hermes et alio nomine Mercurius dictus fuit; alius Noe, qui similiter Hermes et Mercurius nuncupatus fuit; tertius vero Hermes Mercurius Triplex vocatus fuit, quia et rex et philosophus et propheta floruit.'

⁶⁵ Trismegisti, *De sex rerum principiis*, pp. 5–9.

by a philosophico-religious explanation. It is attributed to Hermes by many manuscripts and was commonly considered a work of Trismegistus. According to scholars, this text is a 'synthetic manual of Christian Neoplatonism'. It is based, however, not only on Neoplatonists like Macrobius and Christians like Augustine, but also on the *Asclepius*.⁶⁶

Given the diffusion of the *Asclepius* in twelfth-century culture, it is reasonable to conclude that the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, which uses rational language to express a conception of theology based on Christian Neoplatonism, was attributed to Hermes. For he was the only wise man to have ascended *ad nostram theologiam*, as the author of the *Glosae* himself says.

The most important sentences (*sententiae*) (and also the most widely diffused) are above all the first two, although the text in no way attributes them to Hermes.⁶⁷

The first sentence of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* reads, with its commentary, as follows:

God is a monad that generates a monad and reflects in itself one sole fire of love.

The definition is given by representing the first cause as multiplying numerically in itself, such that the multiplier is conceived as the one, the multiplied as the two, and that which is reflected as the three. This is actually the case with numbers: each unit has its own number, since it is reflected by the others in a different number.⁶⁸

This sentence is attributed to Trismegistus in Alexander Neckam's *Sermo de Trinitate* (1190–97) and *Speculum speculationum* (c. 1210) to demonstrate the possibility of knowing the divine mysteries by means of reason.⁶⁹ Then it is quoted

⁶⁶ According to Françoise Hudry ('Le *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* et la génération en Dieu', in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, ed. by Lucentini, Parri, and Perrone Compagni, pp. 81–97), the *Liber* derives from a re-elaboration of Marius Victorinus's philosophy. I am unable to take a position on this hypothesis on the basis of objective facts. Hudry has confronted and examined the problem in greater detail in a recent monograph (*Les Livres des XXIV Philosophes: résurgence d'un texte du IV^e siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 2009)), in which she again unhesitatingly attributes the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* to Marius Victorinus. Even though this text is nowhere explicitly attributed to Hermes, it nevertheless seems to me that Hudry's hypothesis is rash and requires further discussion, for which there is no space here.

⁶⁷ I have consulted the following edition of this work: *Il libro dei ventiquattro filosofi*, ed. by P. Lucentini, 2nd edn (Turin: Adelphi, 1999).

⁶⁸ 'Deus est monas monadem gignens, in se unum reflectens ardorem. Haec definitio data est secundum imaginationem primae causae, prout se numerose multiplicat in se, ut sit multiplicans acceptus sub unitate, multiplicatus sub binario, reflexus sub ternario. Sic quidem est in numeris: unaquaque unitas proprium habet numerum quia super diversum ab aliis reflectitur.'

⁶⁹ See *Il libro dei ventiquattro filosofi*, ed. by Lucentini, pp. 111–35. My information on the diffusion of the *sententiae* (pp. 111–13) comes from this work.

by Alan of Lille, in the passage quoted above (p. 105): the pagan philosophers, as Alan had argued, intuited the mysteries of the Word, but only a few of them (including Hermes), ascended to the truth of the Spirit. In Alan of Lille and Alexander Neckam, then, the first sentence is understood as extraordinary evidence of the ancient wise men's prophetic knowledge of the mystery of the Trinity.

Peter Lombard, on the other hand, takes a different stance in his *Sentences*. When trying to establish the limits of the speculation of natural reason, he maintains (I. 3. 1) that it is not possible to arrive at the truth about God independently of revelation, and thus that the pagan philosophers only glimpsed a shadow of the truth. Consequently, the doctrine of the monad stated in this sentence of the *Liber*, although valid, cannot have been a doctrine of Hermes. This difficulty is resolved by hypothesizing that Trismegistus was taught by Balaam or by the prophets of the Old Testament, or that he was educated by Christians, or even that he was inspired by God. All this forecasts a central problem that the rediscovery of Hermetic and Chaldean (i.e. of the *Oracula Chaldaica*) doctrine will diffuse in the Renaissance: how was Trismegistus able to have knowledge of Christian theology? Hence the 'historical' explanation that Hermes was a contemporary of Moses: thus he could have learned from him the essential elements of revelation; the same Spirit of God that spoke in the Hebrew prophets had spoken in Hermes or in the Chaldeans.

These vacillations also appear later. Albertus Magnus, in his Commentary on the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard, holds that the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* is a forgery, since the sentence on the monad is too close to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and Trismegistus could not have known it.⁷⁰ If a philosopher spoke in this way without having been taught by learned Christians, then he meant to say something different, that is, that God produced his intellect in the world and loved all the things that he did. The same interpretation reappears in his *Summa theologiae* (after 1270). The sentence can only mean that the one proceeds from the one and, as the *Liber de causis* also says, returns to him out of love and desire for his being. Analogously, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (13. 35), Albertus interprets the sentence as a law of the love that radiates towards others and returns into itself.⁷¹ This interpretation, which tends to see the sentence as a

⁷⁰ He says: 'Dictum Trismegisti confictum est; in libro eius non invenitur' (Albertus Magnus, *Summa theologiae sive de mirabili scientia Dei*, ed. by D. Siedler, W. Kübel, and H. G. Vogels (Münster: Aschendorff, 1978), I. 3. 13. 3).

⁷¹ Albertus Magnus, *Enarrationes in Ioannem*, ed. by A. Borgnet (Paris, 1898), p. 521.

piece of pagan knowledge, is also taken up by Thomas Aquinas, for whom the life of the monad signifies the creation of the world (*Summa theologiae* I. 32. 1).

Sturlese observes that the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* is then taken up quite frequently, and with great liberty, by Albert's followers, although both Eckhart and Berthold use the famous first sentence (Berthold also utilizing the commentary to sentence 7 and sentence 22) to declare that the pagan Hermes knew the specific characteristics of God.⁷² There is thus a continuity between Proclus and Hermes: ancient wisdom, the philosophical revelation of the truths of faith, had already existed, albeit in an incomplete way, in Hermes and Plato.

The second sentence of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* reads as follows:

God is an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. This definition is given by depicting the first cause, in its own life, as a continuum. The terminus of its extension is lost above the where and further still. Therefore its centre is everywhere, and the soul cannot think it with any dimension. And when it seeks the circumference of its sphericity, it will say that it is elevated to infinity, since that which has no dimension is indeterminate, as was the beginning of creation.⁷³

In Lucentini's interpretation, this sentence uses a geometric metaphor to depict the life of the first cause and its necessary infinity in the existence of the Trinity. The source of the sentence can be found in late pagan and Christian Platonism, in the one-all god of the *Asclepius*.

It is cited by Alan of Lille (*Regulae caelestis iuris* 7), who states that God is justly called a 'sphere', since the sphere lacks a beginning and an end. The centre stands for created being: just as time is only an instant when compared to eternity, thus created being, when compared with the immensity of God, is only a point or a centre. And the immensity of God is like the circumference, because, arranging everything, it surrounds and embraces everything.

Bonaventure appeals to the image of the infinite sphere in his commentary on the *Sententiae* of Alexander of Hales (written in 1250–53), when discussing the thesis that God is in all things. Later, in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1259), he states that the centre and the circumference constitute a unit. In the sense that he is eternal and infinitely present, God is the centre and the circumference of all times, and since he is the simplest and the greatest, he is everything in everything

⁷² Sturlese, 'Proclo ed Ermete in Germania', p. 28.

⁷³ 'Deus est sphaera infinita cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam. Haec definitio data est per modum imaginandi ut continuum ipsam primam causam in vita sua. Terminus quidem suae extensionis est supra ubi et extra terminans. Propter hoc ubique est centrum eius, nullam habens in anima dimensionem. Cum quaerit circumferentiam suae sphaericitatis, elevatam in infinitum dicet, quia quicquid est sine dimensione sicut creationis fuit initium est.'

and outside of everything, like an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and circumference is nowhere.

Eckhart, in his *Lectio I super Ecclesiastici librum* chap. 24. 23. nn. 17–20, observes that God, as is said in the scriptures, is everything in everyone, beginning and end, the first and the last. For this reason a wise man said that God is an infinite intellectual sphere whose centre is everywhere with its circumference, and which has (as it was written in the same book) as many circumferences as points. The same explanation recurs in his *Expositio libri Exodi* 16. 18. n. 91: God is everything in himself and in all things, as sentence II also attests. The same image reappears in his *Expositio sancti Evangelii secundum Iohannem* 14. 13. n. 604. The identity of the centre and the circumference signifies the identity of the minimum and the maximum, because the least work of God encapsulates all his glory.

Bonaventure's and Eckhart's interpretations of sentence II fall within the tradition of Christian Platonism. They will also be found in the writings of Thomas Bradwardine, and they will then flow into the work of Nicolaus Cusanus.

Hermetism in Germany

Beginning in Cologne in the mid-thirteenth century, interest increases for Hermetic writings — and not only for the philosophical ones. Albertus Magnus, while condemning certain insufficiencies and ambiguities in various Hermetic doctrines, seeks to reconcile Hermetism's dual philosophical and 'scientific' aspects. He does so by posing anew the question of the centrality of man in the universe, to which can also be related man's capacity as a magician.⁷⁴ He makes use of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, of the *Asclepius*, and of Hermetic writings on alchemy, astrology, and magic. Sometimes Hermes is criticized, but he is always esteemed as one of the most ancient philosophers. Thus Albertus criticizes his pantheism, which he detects (and rightly so, as has been seen on p. 96) in the *Asclepius*.

God is everything that exists: this is the worst error, as it destroys all the degrees of the existents.⁷⁵ (*De causis et processu universitatis* I. 4. 3)

Nevertheless, he accepts many of the *Asclepius*'s positions, as in his affirmation (*Metaphysica*, I. 1. 1) that 'homo est nexus Dei et mundi', which derives from chap. 6 of the *Asclepius*.

⁷⁴ For pp. 113–14, we follow Sturlese, 'Proclo ed Ermete in Germania', esp. pp. 28–33.

⁷⁵ 'Deus est omne quod est [...] pessimus error [...] et destruit omnes gradus entium.'

Regarding the sentences of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, Albertus Magnus also harbours doubts about the validity of the first sentence. In his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard,⁷⁶ he takes up the problem of the natural knowledge of God, and he echoes the position that the philosophers, guided by reason, could not ascend to the full knowledge of the Trinity.⁷⁷ They were limited to understanding God as the first cause of being. Thus, Plato may have pronounced a few truths about the Christian God, but perhaps he spoke about a 'son' to designate the sensible universe. Thus Albertus rejects Abelard's interpretation of *Asclepius* 8, which we saw above. Another hypothesis is that Hermes might have spoken about 'mind' or 'intellect' generated by the Father as an expression for the thought of God and the world of the ideas, or finally, that he came to know of the books of Moses and the prophets during his travels to Egypt and Palestine. Stories about Plato's travels to Egypt had already arisen in Late Antiquity; Renaissance Hermetists take them up precisely for the purpose of explaining the correspondence between Christian doctrine (derived from Hebraism, whose master was Moses the Egyptian) and the doctrine of the Egyptian Hermes.

In conclusion, Albertus Magnus frankly admitted the invalidity of certain positions, but he was willing to accept others. Indeed, he considered philosophical Hermetism the prototype of an ancient pagan wisdom that was in many respects reconcilable with Christianity. Moreover, the alchemical doctrines seemed to him to be traceable to those of Trismegistus, who was then considered the most ancient writer on alchemy.

Hermetism in France

In Paris, where dependence on the Church was greater, the primary areas of interest were dialectics and Aristotelianism, and these were directed towards the elaboration of metaphysical topics. William of Auvergne was much more critical towards Hermetism. His condemnation of Hermetism included magic and astrology, especially in his *De legibus* (1228–30) and *De universo* (1231–36). For example, in *De legibus* 23 he echoes Augustine's condemnation of the making of statues and thus of gods.⁷⁸ We might note that in that passage the *Asclepius* is

⁷⁶ Albertus Magnus, *Commentarii in I Sententiarum*, in *Opera Omnia*, XXV (Paris, 1893), pp. 113–14.

⁷⁷ This has been observed by Lucentini (*Il Libro dei ventiquattro filosofi*, p. 117).

⁷⁸ Gulielmi Alverni, *Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1674; facsimile, Frankfurt: Nachdruck, 1963), 66b FH.

referred to as *de hellera*, a title which derives from the *inscriptio* of various manuscripts in which the Hermetic text is called *dehlera ad Asclepium* (some modern scholars think *dehlera* is a corruption of *biblos hiera*). We are thus quite far from the 'openness' demonstrated by the previous century.

Hermetism in England

Interpretations of Hermetism in thirteenth-century Oxford, which as elsewhere are focused above all on the *Asclepius*, give rise to an image of Hermes as a moral philosopher rather than as a theologian.⁷⁹ His doctrine is fit into the framework of the divine origin of knowing, and sometimes Hermetic arguments are used against the 'infidels'. In the fourteenth century, Thomas Bradwardine follows this interpretive line, but, moving away from the polemic against idolatry, he considers other themes: man, the soul, the world, time, eternity, and necessity. The University of Oxford has a fundamental and completely autonomous role in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, since as opposed to the French milieu, it feels no pressure from the papacy.

The *Summa theologica* attributed to Alexander of Hales exhibits many references to Hermetic works, especially the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* and the *Asclepius*. At this point, a kind of 'dossier' of Hermetic doctrines begins to be compiled: from the *Liber* are taken the first and second sentences, from the *Asclepius* the doctrine that God has no name and yet possesses all names (*Ascl.* 26), as well as the doctrine that man is endowed with a double nature, on account of which he must tend to the earth and turn his glance to the heavens (*Ascl.* 8).

In his *Opus maius* and *Metaphysica* (between 1250 and 1270), Roger Bacon draws on the *Asclepius* for what pertains to moral philosophy, and he relies on the *Tabula smaragdina* (a medieval astrological text attributed to Hermes) and other works of astrology in areas of natural philosophy. He maintains that one sole revealed knowledge exists, a *perennis philosophia*; but this does not rule out a *philosophia naturalis*. Such is also attested by Hermes Trimegistus, who is *triplex* because he dedicated himself to natural philosophy, moral philosophy, and metaphysics — a new attempt to explain the title of 'Trismegistus'. Natural truths derive from sensible, external experience, whereas supernatural ones are acquired by means of internal experience, revelation, or illumination. Three different forms of illumination are distinguishable in internal experience: general or universal illumination,

⁷⁹ My discussion on pp. 115–21 is based on Sannino, 'La tradizione ermetica a Oxford'.

which is uniformly distributed to all men and which constitutes the foundation of philosophical wisdom; primitive illumination, which concerns the revelation of natural truths and of primal knowing; and special illumination, which is of a religious character and concerns supernatural truths. *Philosophia* or *sapientia divina* was revealed through general illumination first to Adam and the patriarchs, and then to the true and devout philosophers who were the descendents of Seth and Noah. But later, in the time of Nimrod and Zoroaster, of Atlas, of Prometheus, of Mercury or Trismegistus, of Asclepius and of Apollo, who were themselves worshipped as gods, the pride of many caused God to darken the hearts of men. Only later, in the time of Solomon, did *sapientia* reach the Greek thinkers, who brought about a renewal of philosophy, rediscovering the revelation that God had given to the patriarchs and the prophets (*Opus maius* II. 1, pp. 38–41). Let us note the novelty of this historicizing interpretation — which I would venture to call pre-Ficinian — of the history of *sapientia* and of Trismegistus's role in it: Hermes is mentioned among the great pagan philosophers because they, although not in possession of Christian truth, did not neglect moral philosophy. Bacon takes up Augustine's testimony (cf. *De civ. Dei* XVIII. 8 and 39), which is based on that of the *Asclepius* (chap. 37), about the genealogy of the two Hermes, and he observes that Mercury Trismegistus, grandson of the first Mercury, was one of the first wise men to be an expert in moral philosophy. This is the context for Bacon's use, in his *Opus maius* and *Metaphysica*, not only of the philosophical works of Apuleius (he expressly cites the *De Platone et eius dogmate* and the *De deo Socratis* — an interesting witness to the use of Apuleius's *opuscula*) but also of a certain *De divinitate*, which is none other than the *Asclepius*. Incidentally, the title *De divinitate* is also used for the *Asclepius* in a coeval manuscript containing the philosophical works of Apuleius: Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Reg. Lat. 1572, thirteenth century, R in my edition.⁸⁰ On the basis of the *Asclepius*, Bacon maintains that certain fundamental truths of Christianity, intuited *moraliter* by the pagan philosophers, can be employed to convert non-believers. Hermes' testimony, however, also serves to clarify certain problems — such as the creation of the world, the immortality of the soul, the existence of angels, and the fate reserved for the soul after death — which are not specifically moral but which Bacon defines as such. Therefore he employs the same Hermetic passages in both the *Opus maius* and the *Metaphysica*, whose intention is to convert pagans by means of philosophical doctrines that are common to both Christians and the faithless.

⁸⁰ Apulei Platonici Madaurensis, *Opera quae supersunt*, vol. III: *De philosophia libri*, ed. by C. Moreschini (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1991).

Consequently, Bacon states apropos the birth of Christ that the incarnation had been foretold by the ancient astrologers Hermes and Astabus (i.e. Asclepius). Likewise, Hermes is listed among those philosophers who spoke about the creation of the world in their moral writings. Moreover, the description of angels as motors of the celestial bodies and their division into good and bad is also based on Trismegistus's doctrine. Finally, to demonstrate the immortality of the soul Bacon refers not only to Aristotle and Avicenna, but also to Cicero and to Mercury's *De divina natura*, that is, chap. 28 of the *Asclepius*.

To explain what the true worship of God is, Bacon first adduces the opinions of Avicenna, Albumazar, Plato, Cicero, and Aristotle, and then he cites the final prayer of the *Asclepius*. This seems an important detail, because no one (to my knowledge) had yet interpreted the Hermetic text's famous prayer in a Christian sense.

The extensive use of passages from the *Asclepius*, cited as *De divinitate* or *De divinis*, in both the *Opus maius* and the *Metaphysica* demonstrates a good knowledge of the text on Bacon's part. Furthermore, he also knows the *Book of the Twenty-Four Philosophers*. In conclusion, the most interesting aspect of his interpretation consists in the fact that he seems to follow the interpretations given to Hermetic thought by Lactantius and by certain authors of the twelfth century. What is more — and this is certainly important — Augustine's criticism of Hermes and the cult of the idols has no hold on Bacon.

The *Summa philosophiae* attributed to Robert Grosseteste is the work of an anonymous author, probably English, who had a good knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy. The history of philosophy it contains is similar to the one presented by Bacon. Like Bacon, the author of the *Summa* also includes the first Hermes, grandson of Atlas and founder of Hermopolis, among the ancient philosophers; he lived after the sons of Noah and Abraham, who had educated the Egyptians in arithmetic and astronomy. In this way, this author also intends to demonstrate that a historical continuity existed between pagan knowledge and Christianity. He provides this information out of a desire to better historicize Hermes' teaching and its milieu, and it is regularly taken up by later Hermetists (Ficino, Patrizi) as well. Mercury, together with the Platonists, was one of the few pagan philosophers to have intuited certain Christian truths, among them the mystery of the incarnation. Another interesting aspect of the *Summa*, and one which is not found in Bacon's interpretation, is the relationship it posits between Trismegistus and Plato: the author sees the connection in elements that are ultimately secondary (the use of metaphors and arcane words and the movement of the celestial spheres), but in this way he, too, fits into that movement, then in its infancy, that saw a harmony between Plato and Trismegistus.

Thomas of York, in his *Sapientiale*, also considers Greek philosophy an introduction to the Gospels, which are the divine origin of true wisdom. For this reason, wisdom is the bailiwick not only of the doctors of the Church, called *sapientes Dei*, but also of the philosophers, who are *sapientes mundi*. Christianity can therefore accept certain doctrines of the pagan philosophers, provided that they are put to just use. This is why the *Asclepius* has the title of *De Deo deorum*, because it speaks of the Christian God, who is superior to all the pagan gods. In accordance with these pagan doctrines, acceptable to a Christian, the soul is the *essentia et divinae similitudinis forma*, the very words the *Asclepius* (chap. 7) uses to speak of 'essential' man (*ousiodes*).⁸¹ The dogma of the Trinity was also intuited by the *sapientes mundi*, and among them a special place was reserved for Trismegistus, whose first sentence of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* is used and commented on by the author.

That doctrines of the *Asclepius* are to be found in the works of Thomas Bradwardine has been known for some time; Nock and Festugière cited certain passages of the English philosopher in the apparatus to their edition. The work in which Bradwardine makes systematic use of Hermetism is the *De causa Dei*, in three books (on God, on free will, and on the relationship between man and God). This text also enjoyed a certain popularity in Italy. As Garin informs us, it is found in the manuscript Conv. Sopp. G. 3. 418 of the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence,⁸² which was transcribed in Paris for the hermit Francesco de' Nerli, master of theology at the Florentine Studio. In this manuscript, all of Bradwardine's Hermetic quotations are underlined and annotated in the margins, which shows the possessor's interest in Hermetic doctrine. Bradwardine's object is to confute the opinions of the so-called 'modern Pelagians', who argue that free will is sufficient for human salvation and thus limit God's role as saviour. He maintains that the truths of faith were revealed, and therefore that faith has the primary role; reason has the secondary one of illustrating those truths. Once he has established this fundamental principle, Bradwardine, like the other Oxford philosophers, searches for the historical antecedents to Christian theology. God is the origin of the beings that are good, and thus he is the highest good. This postulate is supported with quotations from the father of the philosophers, who affirmed the infinite greatness and perfection of God. This 'father' is Hermogenes (i.e. Hermes), triple Mercury, triple Trismegistus, three times the greatest in philosophy, king of Egypt, philosopher,

⁸¹ See p. 69 and note 147.

⁸² E. Garin, *Ermetismo del Rinascimento* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1988), pp. 36–37.

and poet (here we have another interpretation of the term 'Trismegistus'). This Mercury wrote the *De verbo aeterno* (the title is an interpretation of *Verbum perfectum*, Quodvultdeus's translation of *Logos teleios*). He said in *Asclepius* 34 (this medieval chapter division is interesting; in modern editions it would be chap. 30) 'Ipse totus est plenus atque perfectus', and in chap. 35, 'Ipse sanctus et incorruptus, sempiternus est, et si quod potest melius nuncupari'. Bradwardine corroborates this doctrine of the *Asclepius* by citing in support not the first or the second sentence of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, as was customary, but the fifth: 'Deus est quo nihil melius excogitari potest' (God is that than which nothing better can be thought).⁸³ He then examines the errors of those who have denied the supreme greatness of God, in particular the error of those who worship stars and idols. Among these, however, Bradwardine sets apart those who recognized the existence of a divinity supreme above the rest and thus anticipated the Christian doctrine of the single God. One of them is Apuleius, author of the *De mundo*; another is Hermes, who in the *De verbo aeterno* (which title was just explained above) calls God by the name of 'Jove' (chap. 20, but chap. 27 in modern editions). This 'constellation' of witnesses is also new and interesting.

As a result, Bradwardine interprets the passages of the *Asclepius* that touch on the supreme god as meaning the Christian God. Of course, no man can 'create' god, since otherwise he would be stronger than him, and therefore what is said in chaps 23–24 of the *Asclepius* is mistaken — indeed, a difficult passage for any Christian Hermetist to interpret. According to Bradwardine, this Hermetic doctrine can be interpreted in two ways: if it is understood to have the precise meaning that man creates god, it is unacceptable because it is a form of idolatry; but if the text is *aequivocus*, then it is not dangerous, because its terms permit of an 'allegorical' interpretation. A few objections follow: Why did Hermes, despite having recognized the existence of a single infinitely perfect God, not worship him alone? Why does he consecrate idols to demons and to good and evil spirits, thus falling into contradiction with himself? An explanation could be that the idols receive a kind of cult from Hermes but not proper worship, which is owed to God alone. Moreover, admitting that it is angels who give life to the idols constructed by men, how would the angels be inserted into them? By their own will or by force? And above all, how would it not be against nature for man, who is inferior to angels, to give them orders? The object of these charges is to demonstrate that the cult of the idols is in contradiction with the *Asclepius*'s declaration that there exists a single

⁸³ A very similar formulation (*quo nihil melius cogitari potest*) is found in Anselm, *Proslogion*, chap. 18. I would like to thank Dr Baker for bringing this reference to my attention.

God, and therefore that the Hermetic author falls into idolatry in the same way as the other pagans.

Another fundamental issue of Hermetism had always been the ineffability and incomprehensibility of God. Here Bradwardine demonstrates his knowledge of the ambiguity in Hermetic texts, according to which God is knowable from the world and yet is utterly unknowable on account of his absolute transcendence. He thus cites sentences XVI, XXI, and XXIII of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* and the *Asclepius* (chap. 32, and other phrases quoted somewhat *ad sensum*). Against those who presume to be able to know God and his actions fully, and who reject the Christian idea that it is impossible to arrive at God with reason, it is necessary to appeal to the authority of Hermetic texts, which maintain that God's transcendence makes him absolutely unknowable. Miracles themselves, events that outstrip the forces of nature, are extraordinary occurrences ascribable to the greatness of God, and to those who cast doubt on them Bradwardine replies with the testimony of Hermogenes, according to whom it is God who performs miracles.

Bradwardine discusses two ancient theories about the creation of the world: whether it was created in time from nothing by God, or if, on the contrary, it is ingenerable. The philosopher's object is to demonstrate that all pagan authors, the prophets and the philosophers before Aristotle, had affirmed the origin of the world in time. Among them, Hermes, who earned the title 'Father of the philosophers', deserves a more extensive commentary. He frequently said in the *Asclepius* that it was precisely by creating the world that God manifested his power and goodness to the utmost. In fact, all things were in him before he created them (*Ascl.* 2); he is *gubernator* and *effector* (chap. 3) and lord (chaps 6, 15, 22). Consequently, on the basis of the *Liber de sex rerum principiis* and the *Asclepius*, Bradwardine exalts God's greatness and his lordship over the universe, God who is 'Father of all things, or Lord of all things, or he who, alone, is everything' (cf. *Ascl.* 1).⁸⁴ And he, too, like the great philosophers of the twelfth century, gives Hermes credit for having intuited, albeit confusedly, the existence of the Holy Spirit. He refers to *Asclepius* 20–21, to those passages in which it is said that God, alone and everything, contains in himself the fertility of both sexes, creates all that he wants, and wants only the good, because his will is good: 'This divine will, conformable to the Holy Spirit, Hermes himself seems to call Spirit sometimes' (*Causa Dei* I. 2, Savile, 156CD).⁸⁵

⁸⁴ 'Pater omnium vel Dominus omnium vel is qui solus est omnia.'

⁸⁵ 'Hanc autem voluntatem divinam Spiritui Sancto aptam et idem Hermes videtur quandoque Spiritum nominare.'

The power of God is applied to the world, moving all things heavenly and earthly, superior and inferior. Yet he remains unmoved in his stability; he is his *firma stabilitas* (*Ascl.* 30). Bradwardine also takes up the Hermetic text's concept of eternity, an attribute of God related to his immobility and immutability, as well as that of eternal necessity, that is, *heimarmene*, which binds all events together into a continuous chain (chaps 39–40). Nevertheless, such a necessity of things depends on a divine law. In fact, fate, necessity, and order are instruments of the divine will, and fate actuates God's eternal providence in the world, just as the *Asclepius* taught (chap. 40).

Nicolaus Cusanus

The discovery of the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* and its translation into Latin by Marsilio Ficino in 1463 provide a crystal clear line of demarcation in the history of Christian Hermetism; from then on the knowledge of Hermetic doctrines grows considerably. Nicolaus Cusanus, whose work preceded that translation, is thus placed in the line of the great medieval philosophers we have been considering here.

The Cardinal's interest in Hermetism has recently been studied by Pasquale Arfè.⁸⁶ He observes that, according to Cusanus, Hermes was one of the pagan wise men who rightly believed in the oneness of God and to whom idolatry was thus utterly foreign — Augustine's condemnation, then, would seem to find no echo in Cusanus. In chapter 7 of the *Apologia doctae ignorantiae* (1449), Cusanus maintains that Trismegistus, when he wrote about not throwing pearls before swine, was emphasizing — as had, essentially, Dionysius the Areopagite, Saint Paul (in his letters to Timothy), and Christ himself — the necessity of not initiating the ignorant into the secrets of mystical knowledge.⁸⁷ As a consequence, in the homily

⁸⁶ P. Arfè, 'The Annotations of Nicolaus Cusanus and Giovanni Andrea de' Bussi on the *Asclepius*', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 62 (1999), 29–59; Arfè, 'Alberto Magno e Nicola Cusano interpreti dell'*Asclepius*', in *Nicolaus Cusanus zwischen Deutschland und Italien*, ed. by M. Thurner (Berlin: Akademie, 2002), pp. 129–51; Arfè, 'Ermete Trismegisto e Nicola Cusano', in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, ed. by Lucentini, Parri, and Perrone Compagni, pp. 223–43. The presence of Hermetic doctrines in Cusanus was previously noted, inter alios, by Garin, *Studi sul platonismo medievale*, p. 152, and E. Vansteenberghe, *Le Cardinal Nicolas de Cues (1401–1464): l'action – la pensée* (Paris: H. Champion, 1920; repr. Frankfurt am Main: Nachdruck Minerva GMBH, 1963), pp. 434–36.

⁸⁷ Nicolaus de Cusa, *Opera Omnia*, II: *Apologia doctae ignorantiae*, ed. by R. Klibansky (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007), pp. 5–6.

Ibant magi (*Sermo* II. 26, of 1431), Cusanus distinguishes between natural magic and necromantic magic, and he knows that there exist ‘certain books on divination and miracles, books carved into stone before the flood and discovered by Hermes; they reached Ham and his son Canaan, Zoroaster, and Aristotle’.⁸⁸

In a passage of his homily on *In principio erat Verbum* (chap. 11), which dates to 1428–30, Cusanus refers to Hermes’ statement from the *Logos teleios* that God generated his Son and loved him as the product of his generation.⁸⁹ This he does, in accordance with the widespread custom in medieval speculation on Hermetism, by way of that text’s citation in Lactantius’s *Divinae institutiones* (IV. 6. 4). Hermes says that this Son is ineffable and is the cause of the existence of the universe; the reason for his generation was the goodness of the Father: ‘Causa autem huius causae voluntas boni, quae deum provexit, cuius nomen non potest ore hominum fari’ (cf. Lact., *Div. instit.* IV. 7. 3). And, in confirmation of this will to generate the Word that is greater than human language, on account of which it cannot be pronounced (and therefore Cusanus employs *Verbum* to mean both ‘Word’ and the hypostasis of the Person of the Son), Cusanus again cites Lactantius and his comparison of the Christian Logos with Zeno’s Logos (*Div. instit.* IV. 9. 2), and he emphasizes Hermes’ authority and wisdom (IV. 9. 3).⁹⁰ We have already examined this group of witnesses above, p. 40. Cusanus still holds to Lactantius’s inveterate testimony that a doctrine as central to the Christian religion as the generation of the Son was indeed revealed to Hermes.

The doctrine of God’s ineffability is justified in *Sermo* XXIII. 29 (*Domine, in lumine vultus tui*) with the observation that God is the unity in the multiplicity that is in the unity itself (‘cum ipse sit unitas in multitudine que est in ipsa unitate’),⁹¹ and it is strengthened also by *Asclepius*’s statement (chap. 2: ‘omnia unum esse et unum omnia’); yet that passage must be read with caution, because, as Thierry of Chartres had already observed (see p. 96), we must not suppose that the world’s multiplicity is directly God.

In the *De docta ignorantia* (I. 24. 75) Cusanus observes that God’s name is unutterable, just as is signified by the Hebrew tetragrammaton. Therefore, if we read the affirmation *unus et omnia* in the *Asclepius*, it must be interpreted *secundum*

⁸⁸ Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera Omnia*, XVI: *Sermones I* (1430–1441), ed. by R. Haubst and others (Hamburg: Meiner, 1991), pt. 3.

⁸⁹ Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera Omnia*, XVI: *Sermones I*, ed. by Haubst and others, pt. 1.

⁹⁰ It should be noted that Cusanus provides the Hermetic text in Latin translation, but that in Lactantius it is in Greek: should we suppose that he translated it personally?

⁹¹ Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera Omnia*, XVI: *Sermones I*, ed. by Haubst and others, pt. 4.

essentiam propriam, and *omnia uniter* is a better definition. In the same way, in the *De dato patris luminum* he states:

And although God is everything in everyone, nevertheless God is not mankind, even if it is legitimate to acknowledge, interpreting it correctly,⁹² Hermes Trismegistus's sentence that God can be called by the name of all things and all things by the name of God, just as man can be called God become man and this world can be called sensible god, as Plato also maintains.⁹³ (II. 102)

Cusanus takes up the *Asclepius*'s statement (chap. 20) that God possesses all names and, vice versa, should not be called by any name. This doctrine is found in *De beryllo* 13⁹⁴ and is repeated in the *Idiota de mente* (III. 69).⁹⁵ Cusanus's theology is also informed by the Hermetic doctrine that God is both sexes (cf. *Ascl.* 20) and is love. Indeed, he affirms that the *sapientes* (i.e. the Hermetists) thereby intend to explain, as well as they were able, 'the most fertile Trinity of the creator' (*De pace fidei* X. 27).⁹⁶

The Cardinal takes from the *Asclepius* the doctrine of matter, adding that, thanks to its lack of form, it 'nurses' souls (*De docta ignorantia* III. 8. 134).⁹⁷ A lesser-known doctrine taken from the *Asclepius* (chap. 17) is that Mercury was right to say that the world is not visible by itself and that in it and with regard to it one sees nothing other than the *rerum formae* that are contained within it (*Dialogus de ludo globi* 13).⁹⁸

⁹² Thus I understand the expression *sano intellectu*. Cusanus apparently had little sympathy with the strong pantheism that characterizes the *Asclepius*.

⁹³ Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera Omnia*, IV: *Opuscula*, ed. by P. Wilpert (Hamburg: Meiner, 1959). 'Et quamvis sic Deus sit omnia in omnibus, non est tamen humanitas Deus, licet posset sano intellectu Hermetis Trismegisti dictum admitti, deum omnium rerum nominibus et res omnes dei nomine nominari, sic quod homo nominari possit deus humanatus et hic mundus deus sensibilis, ut et Plato voluit.' The editor notes that this doctrine also takes into consideration Thierry's observations on the matter (see p. 96).

⁹⁴ Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera*, XI. 1: *De beryllo*, ed. by I. G. Senger and C. Bormann (Hamburg: Meiner, 1988).

⁹⁵ Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera* V: *Idiota, De sapientia, De mente*, ed. by R. Steiger (Hamburg: Meiner, 1983): 'Mirabiliter Trismegisti dictum dilucidasti, qui aiebat deum omnium rerum nominibus ac omnes res dei nomine nominari'.

⁹⁶ Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera*, VII: *De pace fidei*, ed. by R. Klibansky and H. Bascour, O.S.B. (Hamburg: Meiner, 1959).

⁹⁷ 'Unde Hermes aiebat yle esse corporum nutricem, et illam informatem nutricem animarum.'

⁹⁸ Nicolai de Cusa, *Opera*, IX: *Dialogus de ludo globi*, ed. by I. G. Senger (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998).

Drawing on two well-known passages of the *Asclepius* (chaps 6 and 8), Cusanus also argues (*De beryllo* 7) that man is a second god:

Note that Hermes Trismegistus says that man is a second god. Indeed, as God is a creator of real beings and of natural forms, thus man is a creator of rational beings and artificial forms, which only exist as likenesses of his own intellect, just as the creations of God are likenesses of the divine intellect.⁹⁹

Now, Cusanus possessed the oldest manuscript of the philosophical works of Apuleius, in which the *Asclepius* is also found (Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS 10054–56, ninth century). The manuscript contains marginal annotations by Cusanus, who underlined its most important statements and those with the greatest relevance to Christian theology. Pasquale Arfè, in a careful examination of these marginal glosses, managed to connect them with the Cardinal's principal doctrines.¹⁰⁰ In a gloss on the text of the *Asclepius* (chap. 8, fol. 20^r, Arfè, 'Annotations', n. 17), Cusanus repeats: *Nota quomodo deus de deo*. The gloss does not seem to be relevant to this issue, since the *Asclepius* speaks in that passage (according to Lactantius's and medieval interpretation) of the Son's origin from the Father, not of the origin of man. But the text just cited from the *De beryllo* implies that Cusanus understands the phrase *deus de deo* not, as had been the case from Lactantius on, as the generation of the Son, but as the creation of man, a second god. Martin Thurner emphasizes how, according to Cusanus, the presence of God in man allows man, too, to be considered a *deus humanatus* or a *humanus deus*.¹⁰¹ What we have here, then, is a revision of the Hermetic conception of the supreme dignity of man, the *magnum miraculum* of the *Asclepius*.

On the Threshold of the Renaissance

At the end of the Middle Ages, Christian *literati* are still approaching Hermetism in the way pioneered by the great thinkers of the twelfth century: they search

⁹⁹ 'Adverte Hermetem Trismegistum dicere hominem esse secundum deum. Nam sicut Deus est creator entium realium et naturalium formarum, ita homo rationalium entium et formarum artificialium, quae non sunt nisi sui intellectus similitudines, sicut creaturae Dei divini intellectus similitudines.'

¹⁰⁰ *Cusanus-Texte*, vol. III: *Marginalien*, pt 5: *Apuleius. Hermes Trismegistus aus Codex Bruxelensis 10054-56*, ed. by P. Arfè (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2004).

¹⁰¹ M. Thurner, 'Explikation der Welt und mystische Verinnerlichung: Die hermetische Definition des Menschen als "secundus deus" bei Cusanus', in *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, ed. by Lucentini, Parri, and Perrone Compagni, pp. 245–60.

through the writings of Trismegistus for confirmations and forecasts of Trinitarian theology; they ponder the theme of the supreme greatness of God, to whom no name can be given; and they celebrate the greatness of man.

Eugenio Garin briefly noted the contrast between Coluccio Salutati and Giovanni Dominici (and thus we stand at the threshold of the Renaissance). According to Garin, we find in Salutati a voice that is of no special note and is of a moral-ascetic tone.¹⁰² Salutati supposedly made use of a medieval reworking of Hermetic doctrines, the *Liber Alcidi*; however, two citations of the *Asclepius* are also found in the *De laboribus Herculis*. The first has little significance, since Salutati misunderstands its meaning. When setting up his exposition (I. 5), he refers to the disputations conducted by the philosophers of his times, which he considers substantially inconclusive and of little importance (since removed from man's true interests), and he asserts that in the *Asclepius* Trismegistus had already prophesied the abandonment of true philosophy in favour of subtleties and questions of no real utility (cf. *Ascl.* 14). It is uncertain, however, how convinced he was of the truth of this 'prophecy', and he does not cite it verbatim. Later, in II. 6, Salutati feels obliged to confront the problematic fact that even the authoritative Trismegistus had dealt with magic, citing two passages of chap. 37 of the *Asclepius* (which, as we shall soon see, are the hottest of the Renaissance; they regard the interpretation of the figure of Hermes, who seems to compromise his reputation, if such can be said, precisely for having been a proponent of magic).

Nor does his contemporary Giovanni Dominici avoid this problem.¹⁰³ In his *Lucula noctis* (I pars, caput 2. 7), he follows the authority of Augustine, who had said (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 23) that the famous Hermes had distinguished between the celestial gods, which are true and holy, and the gods made by man, which are idols fated to be destroyed in the future. Dominici seems to want to identify in Augustine's criticism, and in a way that is ultimately not dissimilar from Thomas Bradwardine's approach, a relatively positive aspect of Hermetic doctrine: that of recognizing the divinity of the celestial bodies and clearly distinguishing them from idols, which are created by men with magic and will ultimately die. Dominici then continues (taking up a belief by now affirmed for centuries): Trismegistus himself testifies to the existence of the Christian Trinity, distinguishing the Persons and maintaining the simplicity of the divine nature. In fact, the ancient Mercury Trismegistus, who had been included among the gods on account of his extraordinary

¹⁰² E. Garin, *La cultura filosofica del Rinascimento italiano* (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), p. 151.

¹⁰³ Citation from Beati Iohannis Dominici Cardinalis S. Sixti, *Lucula noctis*, ed. by R. Coulon, O.P. (Paris: Librairie Alphonse Picard et Fils, 1908).

wisdom (this is Lactantius's idea, as we saw above, p. 33), says: 'the monad generated a monad and reflects within itself its fire of love; that is, the one generated the one.'¹⁰⁴ The One was indeed born, as Saint Thomas explains when speaking about the lone God.¹⁰⁵ Here Dominici is clearly re-elaborating the first sentence of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* (and not the fourth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, as Garin thought).¹⁰⁶ In accord with the same belief, namely that Trismegistus intended to speak about the Christian Trinity, Dominici takes up (*Lucula noctis* XI. 5) the sentence of the *Logos teleios* regarding the generation of the second god, which for Hermes is the world but for Christians is the Son of God (this sentence ultimately goes back to Lactantius (see above, p. 39), but Dominici claims to have read it in Vincent of Beauvais's '*Libro Naturalis Hystoriae*').¹⁰⁷ It is more difficult to follow Dominici's thought in another passage (XXIII. 4), in which he refers to the same Hermetic sentence: 'whenever he spoke about the construction of the world', Mercury was wont to say 'that the one God generated the one world, which is called "God" on account of God's love of the world itself'.¹⁰⁸ It would seem, then, that Dominici interprets Hermes' statement about the generation of the second god as referring to the world, but that he seeks to bear in mind the other interpretation as well, viz. that God the Father, on account of his love, generates the Son.

A few other Hermetic *sententiae* derive from the *Asclepius*, such as one, not very significant, in *Lucula noctis* XI. 18, that true philosophy consists solely in fixing one's glance incessantly upon the knowledge of God (cf. *Ascl.* 12). Again following Augustine (*De civ. Dei* XVIII. 39), Dominici states that Atlas, the brother of Prometheus, was the maternal grandfather of the most ancient Mercury (*Lucula noctis* XL. 7),¹⁰⁹ and that the books of Mercury, together with those of Pythagoras, Socrates (?), Aristotle, Plotinus, and others, confirm what Augustine says, viz. that profane letters are not useful for living well (XLII. 7); perhaps Dominici meant to refer to the passage of *Salutati* we have just seen, that true philosophy, according to Hermes' prophecy, would be substituted by 'technical' and profane sciences.

¹⁰⁴ 'Monas genuit monadem, et in se ipsum suum reflectit ardorem, idest unus genuit unum.'

¹⁰⁵ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, q. XXXII, 1 ad 1 (this reference is taken from Coulon's note).

¹⁰⁶ Garin, *La cultura filosofica*, p. 151.

¹⁰⁷ I.e. *Speculum Naturale* I. II, an *ad sensum* citation according to Coulon.

¹⁰⁸ This is, I think, how the phrase *propter sui ipsius amorem* must be understood.

¹⁰⁹ This is the chronological place Augustine proposes for the first Trismegistus, which we saw above (p. 76).

This was the cultural situation in the West as inherited by Renaissance scholars when, in the second half of the fifteenth century, they gained access to Greek Hermetism as well, that is, to what we call the *Corpus Hermeticum*. We shall see that only with the diffusion of its Latin translation did the horizon of Hermetism broaden, although certainly not right away. Even Marsilio Ficino, the man responsible for this diffusion, in many ways remained bound to the Hermetic texts (whether authentic or apocryphal) recognized as canonical in the Middle Ages.

In the Byzantine World

The Excerpta Barbari

A chronicle in Greek, now lost, was translated into barbaric Latin in the Merovingian era and published for the first time by Joseph Justus Scaliger in 1606. The author of this translation, on account of his style, was commonly called *Barbarus Scaligeri*, and the text was referred to as *Excerpta Latina Barbari*. It relates that Faunus, the son of Picus,

went to Egypt and remained there clothed in imperial dress. And to the Egyptians he appeared a wise man, and he fooled them with magical arts and spells, and he told them his predictions and his prophecies. He taught them about the explanations found in birds, the auspices of the hoopoe, the neighing of horses, the prophecies of the dead, and many other wicked things. And since the wise men of Egypt saw that he was an expert in calculations and was well versed in speaking, they glorified him as thrice-blessed Hermes, for he knew their languages everywhere, and they also saw that he was quite happy, very rich, and a minister of the gods.¹¹⁰ (IV. 3. 2–3)

This truly barbaric Latin text contains a first attempt at interpreting the name of Trismegistus and his place in the history of Egypt: Hermes supposedly ruled over Egypt and was particularly expert in magic and divination and was a *minister deorum*. In the eleventh century, the lexicon known as the Suda also considers the problem of Trismegistus's name, interpreting 'thrice great' as corresponding to the divine greatness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (s.v. *Hermes ho*

¹¹⁰ Text in *Anonymi Monophysitae Theosophia*, p. 91. 'Tunc descendit in Aegyptum et ibidem demoratus est imperialem vestem indutus. Et sapiens videbatur ab Egyptios, per magicas et maleficia eos decipiebat, et suspirationes et divinationes illos dicebat, avium narrationes et opupas adnuntiationes et equorum hinnitus discebat et mortuorum divinationes et alia plura mala. Et dum computatorem illum cerneret et valde loquacem sapientes Aegyptiorum, Hermem terbeatissimum illum glorificabant pro eo quod linguas eorum bene novisset ubique, simul autem et polyolbum et multoditatum et deorum illum ministrum suspicabant.'

Trismegistos).¹¹¹ This explanation, and precisely this passage, will be taken up by Foix-Candale and Patrizi, who however reject it (see pp. 191 and 267).

Nevertheless, from the seventh to the eleventh centuries there seems to be no interest for Hermetic theosophy in Byzantium. According to Nock and Festugière, the disappearance of Hermetism runs parallel to that of Neoplatonism, interest for which is then reawakened in Photius and subsequently sustained by Psellos.¹¹² The latter takes a fiercely polemical stance towards Hermetism, condemning its involvement with magic. As noted above (pp. 2–3), it was probably in his time that the actual *Corpus Hermeticum* was put together. Magical elements are substantially absent from it, and thus its compiler might have been animated by the same condemnation of magic as Psellos.

Considerations on Michael Psellos

The first testimony does not come from works of Psellos aimed at confuting Hermetism, but rather from annotations whose content suggests that Psellos was their author. In the margin of the text of chapter 18 of the *Poemander* in manuscript B (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS grec 1220), a second hand adds the heading *tou Psellou* followed by a long, polemical note; it is not easily accessible, and so we shall translate it here at length.¹¹³

Psellos writes: It seems that this magician devoted himself to scripture rather assiduously, and therefore it is on its basis that he goes on to describe the creation of the world, not hesitating in the least, now and again, to transcribe Moses' expressions verbatim, just like the entire sentence before us.¹¹⁴ Indeed, it is obvious that the sentence, 'And god said: grow and multiply',¹¹⁵ comes from Moses' cosmogony. And yet, he did not remain completely

¹¹¹ This passage can be found in the edition of A. Adler (Suidae, *Lexicon* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1931)); it has been translated by Holzhausen in *Das Corpus Hermeticum deutsch*, I, 198.

¹¹² *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. by Nock and Festugière, I, p. xlvi.

¹¹³ It was published by Reitzenstein (*Poimandres*, p. 333) in the apparatus criticus to his edition of the *Poemander*.

¹¹⁴ Psellos refers to the *Poemander's* statement (chap. 18): 'All living beings, which had been androgyne, were sundered into two parts — humans along with them — and part of them became male, part likewise female.' Psellos, then, had already noticed the presence of elements of Hebrew scripture in the *Poemander*.

¹¹⁵ More precisely, the text of *Poemander*, on which Psellos is commenting here, reads: 'immediately god said with the holy word: grow with growth and multiply with multiplication, all you things created and made'.

faithful to the simplicity, the clarity, the immediacy, the purity, and, finally, the divine form of God's scripture. Instead he did what Greek wise men generally do: he lost his way among allegories and errors and reveries, abandoning the path that is straight and without distractions, and he was captured [*here the interpretation is uncertain*] by Poimandres. But it is not unknown who this Poimandres of the Greeks was, that is, it might be the one we call 'Lord of the world' (*kosmokrator*)¹¹⁶ or one of those belonging to him. Indeed, the devil, he says,¹¹⁷ is a thief; he spouts our doctrines with his words, not so that his followers will exchange that which they have learned for Christian devotion, but so that they will spread their impiety on the words and the thoughts of the truth and, modifying it in this way, make it more persuasive and more acceptable for more people. Indeed, what Plato¹¹⁸ says is not true, viz. that the Greeks took statements of barbarian origin and made them more beautiful with the aid of their culture and the oracles of Delphi. If anyone is more in the right, it is they who say¹¹⁹ that the search for the truth presented little difficulty for the Greeks, but that they erred above all in their opinion about god. But those who say this are not Christians but the most famous of the Greeks, if one has had the chance to read what Porphyry wrote in his letter to Anebo the Egyptian: 'from now on I desire to learn the truth from him, since I have given up on the Greeks.' So, I am unable to say if any other barbarian race has worshiped the creator and king of the universe with the conceptions and laws of their own country, but it has been demonstrated in many ways that the devotion of the Hebrews was famous the world over and that their Laws were older than both this Hermes and any other wise man among the Greeks.

As Festugière observes (*CH*, I, pp. xlix–l), Psellos also refers to the *Poemander* in his *Accusation of Michael Cerularius*, written in 1059. He mentions Zoroaster the Egyptian (an obvious error) and Hermes Trismegistus in a list of wise men, and, in his *Allegory of Tantalus*, he relates that Hermes Trismegistus, despite his neglect of myths, accepted the story of Zeus and Cronos. They were, according to a euhemeristic interpretation, men who became gods, and therefore Hermes exhorts his son Tat to aspire to a similar destiny. According to Festugière, Psellos is alluding either to a lost Hermetic treatise or to *CH* X. 5, in which Uranus and Cronos are mentioned as having once been men. Finally, Psellos himself, or one of his commentators, knew a Hermetic treatise on alchemy entitled *The Key*, and a *Treatise in Seven Books*, interpreted by Anubis.

Festugière concludes that it is obvious that Psellos knew the *Corpus* but that, strangely, his references to Egyptian wisdom are nevertheless relatively few in

¹¹⁶ Cf. Colossians 6. 12.

¹¹⁷ Reitzenstein conjectures 'as Basil says', without, however, specifying which passage of Basil might be meant.

¹¹⁸ See *Epinomis* 988b (Reitzenstein's note, as is the next).

¹¹⁹ See Thucydides I. 20.

comparison to his references to the *Oracula Chaldaica* and to 'Chaldean' culture in general.¹²⁰

Festugière's research takes us this far. But Psellos was such a prolific and important literary man and philosopher for his times that one would logically expect more extensive results from further studies. Thanks to the recent publication of his *Opuscula theologica* at the hands of three excellent scholars of late Platonism and Byzantine culture — L. G. Westerink, J. M. Duffy, and P. Gautier — we have gained access to an interesting part of Psellos's writings.

Opusculum 18 is a homily on Luke 10. 18: 'I saw Satan fall from heaven like a thunderbolt.' In one passage, Psellos refers to the authority of

all the Christian and Greek wise men and, before them, Hermes, called Trismegistus. Indeed, when asked to say what the good was, he did not take into consideration the dispositions (*hexeis*) of the soul, that is, the virtues and those dispositions that proceed from superior and inferior ones. Instead he defined the Good as the One that precedes all things, from which all other things, through participation, exist. They are called good, not because they are such in a primary sense, but because they 'are acted upon' (*pathein*)¹²¹ by the good. (p. 98. 27–33)

The reference seems to be to *CH* II. 15–16, VI. 1, and XIV. 9.

Opusculum 19,¹²² dedicated to the question put to Christ by the Sadducees, contains (p. 106. 148–50) a citation of *CH* II. 16. In *Opusculum* 10. 40–50, Psellos cites 'a speech of the secret kind, set forth in secret writings by a pagan expert in philosophy, Hermes, who was called Trismegistus by the pagans. In one of his own discourses, which he entitles *Undeified Mind* (*Akeratos Nous*) [cf. *CH* XI. 2], he says that after God there exist the *aiones*', that is, the 'eternities'. And he concludes: 'Most of these doctrines are in accord with those of the Orphics and the Chaldeans, whereas others he proposed himself.'

Opusculum 106. 136–43 reads:

And in his speeches to Asclepius, Hermes the theologian says more or less (in fact, I don't remember the text itself exactly) that mind does not reside in all men, but that they who have previously cleansed themselves¹²³ act in such a way that their souls may contain it.

¹²⁰ On which, see C. Moreschini, 'Gli *Oracula Chaldaica* nel Rinascimento italiano: alcune osservazioni', *Koinonia* 33 (2009), 143–69.

¹²¹ The expression is odd. It seems to imitate an analogous expression of Maximus the Confessor ('to be acted upon by being': see *Ambigua* 7. 1073B), whom Psellos knew very well.

¹²² This and the preceding *opusculum* are found in the edition of L. G. Westerink and J. M. Duffy (Leipzig: Saur, 2002).

¹²³ Cf. Luke 15. 8, taken from Gregory of Nazianzus, *oratio* 40. 22.

them, God, who possesses mind, pours it into a krater, saying: 'Take this most desirable of objects, oh purified soul.' See how the better among the Greeks are in accord with us [*the text is unclear here*], although they do not use the same names. Indeed, that which we call 'Holy Spirit', they called 'absolute mind' and 'external mind'.¹²⁴ So much for the Greeks.¹²⁵

This reference to the Hermetic text (Psellos is clearly referring here to the fourth treatise of the *Corpus*) was discovered, but in a defective way, by Festugière, who simply observed that this text is found in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS grec 1182, fol. 26^r, but without telling us that it was an *opusculum* of Psellos.¹²⁶

In conclusion, Psellos knows the great authority that Hermes enjoyed among the pagans and recognizes the similarity of his doctrines to Christian ones. But he clearly distinguishes between the two doctrinal realms, that of Hermetism and that of Christianity.

A Scholion on Hermias

Two centuries after Psellos, George Pachymeres was an authoritative representative of the cultural renaissance of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. He is responsible for compiling the principal manuscript of the *Scholia in Phaedrum* of the Alexandrian Hermias: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS grec 1810 (s. xiii). The following verses (here paraphrased in prose) have been added at the end of the text of the *Scholia*:

The first Hermes, since he was born three times and each time a wise man, was justly called 'trismegistus'. The second Hermes,¹²⁷ having explained with the utmost wisdom the three books of Plato's *Phaedrus*, could with good reason be called 'thrice happy'.

Fowden thinks that these verses reflect the interest for Hermetism that was characteristic of the culture of Alexandria,¹²⁸ but he does not exclude the possibility that they are much later — and they probably are, considering their typically Byzantine metrical structure. Perhaps Pachymeres himself wrote them.

¹²⁴ This is a silent quotation, as is the one indicated in the preceding note, of Gregory of Nazianzus, another of the most famous writers of the Byzantine era and one frequently quoted by Psellos. Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *oratio* 31. 5.

¹²⁵ This and the preceding passage are found in the edition of P. Gautier (Michaelis Pselli, *Theologica* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1989), vol. 1).

¹²⁶ *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. by Nock and Festugière, I, pp. xlix–li.

¹²⁷ I.e. Hermias, the author of the commentary read by the anonymous writer of these verses.

¹²⁸ Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, p. 184.

THE REBIRTH OF GREEK HERMETISM IN ITALY: MARSILIO FICINO AND LUDOVICO LAZZARELLI

Marsilio Ficino

In 1463 Marsilio Ficino translated the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* (or rather, its first fourteen treatises).¹ Thanks to this translation Hermetism enjoyed an incredibly wide diffusion and exercised a strong influence on the culture of the Renaissance. But we have already seen the weight Hermetism had in medieval philosophy, and so it is logical that a philosopher like Marsilio Ficino, who was of the highest caliber with regard to not only his speculative power but also his erudition and his grasp of the *history* of ideas, was also well acquainted with certain aspects of medieval Hermetism.

In two innovative studies, Sebastiano Gentile (preceded by the great P. O. Kristeller and followed by Brian Copenhaver) has demonstrated on the basis of certain of Ficino's youthful opuscles that he was acquainted with Hermetism even before translating the *Corpus Hermeticum*.²

¹ An account of the circumstances is found in Ficino's dedication of his translation of Plotinus to Lorenzo de' Medici (*Opera* (Basel: Ex Officina Henricpetrina, 1561), II, 1537). The bibliography on this topic is immense; let it suffice to mention only S. Gentile, 'Ficino ed Ermete', in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Ermete Trismegisto*, ed. by S. Gentile and C. Gilly (Firenze: Centro Di, 1999), pp. 19–26 (p. 19). A review of the historical and cultural situation that led Cosimo de' Medici to propagate a Platonic political ideology is found in B. Tambrun, *Pléthon: le retour de Platon* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), pp. 9–33.

² S. Gentile, 'In margine all'epistola *De divino furore* di Marsilio Ficino', *Rinascimento*, 2nd series, 23 (1983), 33–77; Gentile, 'Ficino ed Ermete', pp. 20–26. See also P. O. Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum, Marsilii Ficini Florentini philosophi platonici opuscula inedita et dispersa primum collegit et ex fontibus plerumque manuscriptis edidit auspiciis Regiae Scholae Normalis Superioris*

The Hermetism of the Young Ficino

In a youthful opuscle, the *Di Dio et anima* (or *Tractatus de Deo et anima vulgaris*), written at the beginning of 1458,³ Ficino mentions first of all that Mercury Trismegistus was an Egyptian philosopher who was much more ancient than the Greeks and that he was called 'God' by the Egyptians and the Greeks 'on account of his infinite knowledge and super-human intelligence' (the source is Lactantius). In addition, Hermes attributes power, wisdom, and goodness to god, thus following the twelfth sentence of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*:

the power of God is the efficient cause, according to Mercury, of each and every creature. Wisdom is like a vast mirror in which the similarities of all things shine [...]. Hence his power, as an example of his wisdom and in the service of his goodness, creates the world.⁴
(*Di Dio et anima*, p. 132)

This doctrine therefore anticipates that of 'Christian theologians', who identify that triad (Power, Wisdom, and Goodness) with the Persons of the Trinity. On this basis Ficino will state soon thereafter (1463), in the preface to his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, that, of the works of Hermes, the *Pimander* seeks to illustrate the *potestas et sapientia Dei*, whereas the *Asclepius* is dedicated to the *voluntas Dei*, which, of course, is Goodness. And in a mature work,⁵ one of his *Praedicationes*, he says:

Love, however, consists in will. Therefore Mercury and Plato, along with our theologians, affirm that the will of God created all things on account of the love lodged in its goodness.⁶
(*Opera*, I, 488)

Another element of the medieval Hermetic tradition can also be seen in Ficino's definition of God, which is the same as the one found in the second sentence of the

Pisanae, volumen alterum (Florence: Olschki, 1937); and B. Copenhaver, 'Hermes Theologus: The Siene Mercury and Ficino's Hermetic Demons', in *Humanity and Divinity in Renaissance and Reformation: Essays in Honor of Charles Trinkaus*, ed. by J. W. O' Malley, T. M. Izbicki, and G. Christianson (Leiden: Brill, 1993), pp. 149–82.

³ Citations are to Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum*, pp. 128–58. See also Gentile, 'In margine all'epistola', pp. 41–44.

⁴ 'la potentia di Dio è cagione secondo Mercurio efficiente di qualunque creatura. La sapientia è come un immenso specchio, nel quale le similitudini di tutte le cose risplendono [...]. Onde la potentia a exemplo di sua sapientia e a fine di sua bontà crea il mondo.'

⁵ There are also other cases in which Ficino's youthful Hermetism appears in his later works.

⁶ 'Amor autem in voluntate consistit. Ideo Mercurius atque Plato una cum nostris Theologis voluntatem divinam ex amore bonitatis suae cuncta procreavisse confirmant.'

Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum:⁷ 'God is an intelligible sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere' (*Di Dio et anima*, p. 134).⁸ This sentence receives a full explanation from Ficino (pp. 134–41), and it can be said to constitute the core of the section of the *Di Dio et anima* dealing with God. Ficino would take it up again in a doctrinal context some years later (*Theologia Platonica* XVIII. 3. 12).⁹

On this basis, it must be concluded (with Gentile¹⁰) that it was through the *Asclepius*, on the one hand, and the medieval tradition, on the other, that Ficino was able to acquaint himself with Hermetism before encountering the Greek treatises, which he would only translate years later. The line of demarcation represented by the translation of 1463 is, then, a pure function of scholarly historicization. For Ficino did not radically change his ideas after having translated the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Rather he supplemented and developed them on the basis of what he found in the Greek treatises he translated. And there was one text well known to both Ficino and the medieval philosophers, one on which they both drew independently: the *Asclepius*.

Hermetism and Platonism

The notion of agreement between Hermes and Plato is fundamental for the Hermetism of Ficino's youthful works. Already in the *Di Dio et anima*, he includes a doxography¹¹ identifying the correspondence between Christianity and certain

⁷ See Copenhaver, 'Hermes Theologus', pp. 162–66. The transmission of this famous sentence in the cultural milieu of the young Ficino has been the subject of several recent studies: P. Lucenini, 'Il "Liber vigintiquattuor philosophorum" nella "Commedia" dantesca e nei suoi primi commenti' (*Platonismo, ermetismo*, pp. 235–64). According to Toussaint, however, Ficino got it not from the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum* itself, but rather from Benvenuto da Imola's commentary on *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 115–17. S. Toussaint, *De l'Enfer à la Coupole: Dante, Brunelleschi, Ficino. A propos des 'codici caetani di Dante'* (Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1997), pp. 83–122; Toussaint, 'Ficino's Orphic Magic or Jewish Astrology and Oriental Philosophy? A Note on *spiritus*, the *Three Books on Life*, Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Zarza', *Accademia*, 2 (2000), 19–31 (pp. 19–20).

⁸ 'Iddio è spera intelligibile, il cui centro è in ogni loco, la circumferentia in nessuno.'

⁹ As observed by R. Marcel in Marsile Ficino, *Théologie Platonicienne*, ed. by Marcel (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1972), *ad locum*.

¹⁰ Gentile, 'In margine all'epistola', pp. 48–50.

¹¹ The doxography is dry but enthusiastic, and it is quite impressive. It can be said that Ficino missed none of the principal doctrines (that were available to him) of the Greek philosophical schools.

Hermetic concepts, as well as other Greek doctrines. Thus Plato (referred to as 'our Plato') and Mercury call 'ideas' the eternal exemplars of things, which are found in Wisdom (p. 138). According to Ficino, the Hermetic doctrine was taken up by Plato, and although many centuries separated the two, 'nevertheless these two lights are in agreement, such that Mercury's spirit truly does seem to have been transformed in Plato's breast' (pp. 133–34).¹² On the basis of this conviction, the philosopher drew up manuscript 709 of the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence (Gentile has provided a description of it¹³). This codex contains the final part of the *Asclepius*, followed by testimonies about Hermes Trismegistus taken from St Augustine, Cicero, Lactantius, and Apuleius's *De Platone* and *De mundo*. Ficino's compilation of these Platonic and Hermetic texts, albeit only in Latin translation, thus attests to his interest in both ancient philosophies.

This attitude can also be found in another work preceding the translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*: the *De voluptate* (1458). Right at the outset, Ficino distinguishes between *voluptas*, on the one hand, and *gaudium* and *laetitia*, on the other. *Gaudium* is the highest pleasure, that which derives from the contemplation of divine reality, as Plato's *Phaedrus* also explains ('perfectum quoddam atque absolutum gaudium, quo in ea ipsa Dei cognitione animus perfruatur'; *Opera*, I. 987). In the *Phaedrus* (247e), Plato uses the poetic word 'ambrosia' for the *gaudium* of the contemplation of god and the realities of the super-Uranian world. In agreement with this Platonic idea is the opinion of Mercury Trismegistus, who when speaking about the highest god expresses himself thus:

You give us reason, mind,¹⁴ understanding. Reason, to investigate you with our thoughts, mind, to know you, and knowledge, so that, knowing you, we may take pleasure in the fact that you have showed yourself to us in your entirety.¹⁵

¹² 'niente di meno sono questi due lumi in modo conformi che pare veramente el Mercuriale spirito nel petto Platonico trasformato'.

¹³ *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone: Mostra di manoscritti stampe e documenti*, catalogue ed. by S. Gentile, S. Niccoli, and P. Viti (Firenze: Le Lettere, 1984), pp. 15–17; Gentile, 'In margine all'epistola', pp. 73–77.

¹⁴ The text reads *sensus*: did Ficino mean 'sensation' instead of 'mind'? Nock-Festugière translate 'de l'intellect'.

¹⁵ 'Condonas nos ratione, sensu, intellegentia. Ratione, ut te suspicionibus indagemus, sensu, ut te cognoverimus, cognitione, ut te cognoscentes gaudemus, quod te ostenderis nobis totum.' Thus Ficino's text in the Basel edition; the text of the *Asclepius*, however, reads *condonans*, referring to the god invoked by Trismegistus. The prayer was already present in the *Di Dio et anima* (p. 135): 'Et però Mercurio disse: Signore nostro, el fine nostro è teco godere, et non è altro gaudio che la

This is a reference to the final prayer of the *Asclepius* (chap. 41). Ficino highlights the phrase *cognitione, ut te cognoscentes gaudeamus, quod te ostenderis totum*, relating it to his interpretation of the *gaudium* spoken of in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Thus the union of Plato and Hermes opens the *De voluptate*. The same pair *gaudium – voluptas* also appears in chap. 2 (*Opera*, I, 991). When referring to the transmigration of souls from humans into animals as is found in the *Asclepius* (chap. 6), Ficino observes:

And since the human race has an intermediate position between God and beasts, and for this reason human beings seem (and rightly so) to participate in both, Trismegistus thinks that they can also migrate into both and, as it were, be transformed.¹⁶

Plato, Ficino continues, also says in the *Phaedo* (83d) that pleasure fixes the soul in the body like a nail. Another instance of agreement between Plato and Hermetism is the following:

On this basis Trismegistus constructs another argument. Indeed, he maintains that all categories of things have a greatest and highest form,¹⁷ and that all the others, on account of their participation in it, are placed in the same category. For example, all hot things become hot thanks to the nature of fire, in which the greatest heat is present; in the same way, all good things must be called good because they follow and imitate the highest and first good (chap. 3). This, then, is Plato's divine opinion about pleasure, with which Mercury Trismegistus, all the Pythagoreans, and the best of the Socratics agree without any hesitation.¹⁸

The agreement between Plato and Hermes is also asserted in a letter composed at the very same time, the *De divino furore* (*Epist.* I. 6), sent on 1 January 1457 to Pellegrino degli Agli. According to Plato, Ficino says, the *exemplaria* of all things

maestà tua intendere' ('And so Mercury said: our Lord, our purpose is to take pleasure in you, and the only pleasure is to understand your majesty'). *Gaudemus* is probably a typographical error: it should read *gaudeamus*, as in the text of the *Asclepius* and as the syntax demands.

¹⁶ 'Cumque humanum genus inter Deum ad bestias medium teneat ob eamque causam utrorumque participes esse merito videatur, in alterum quoque migrare et quasi converti posse Trismegistus existimat.'

¹⁷ Perhaps in chaps 34–35 of the *Asclepius*.

¹⁸ 'Ex iis altera quaedam argumentatio a Trismegisto contextitur. In omnibus quippe rerum generibus unum aliquod maximum atque summum esse vult, cuius participatione reliqua in eodem genere reponantur, ut omnia, quae calida sunt, ignis natura, cui summa caliditas adsit, calida fieri eodemque modo et bona quaecumque sunt, quod summum, primumque bonum sequantur, atque imitentur bona dici debere. (Cap. 3) Haec igitur est divina Platonis de voluptate sententia, in qua Mercurius Trismegistus, et Pythagorici omnes, ac Socratici quoque excellentiores absque ulla dubitatione consentiunt.'

exist in God, and Hermes Trismegistus, the wisest of all the Egyptians, agrees on this count;¹⁹ nay, he taught this doctrine to Plato himself.

According to Gentile, the agreement between Plato and Hermes was probably based, in Ficino's mind, on similarities between Plato's *Timaeus* and the *Asclepius*,²⁰ and Allen also thinks that Ficino saw certain doctrines in the *Pimander* that he might have already seen in Chalcidius, although not in Plato (whom he had not yet read): that of the demiurge, creator of the animate world and of man, and that of the existence of a god the father whose son is the world.²¹ Thus, when Ficino approached the *Corpus Hermeticum* (after his translation of 1463), its treatises I, X, and XIII, that is, those closest to Judaism and Christianity, are the ones that must have seemed especially significant to him. But in any case, according to Allen, despite Ficino's conviction that the *Pimander* was the work of a wise man much more ancient than Plato, he certainly subordinated its cosmology and cosmogony to that of the *Timaeus*.²² Furthermore, he very cautiously observed the fact that the ancient philosophers sometimes used terms that could be connected to Christian Trinitarian theology. Thus in *De Christiana religione* (chap. 22) he says that 'all ancient theology is contained in the books of Plato and is perfected there'. According to Allen's interpretation, Plato was the sublime philosopher for Ficino, and Hermes only a distant precursor. Hermes' principle work, the *Pimander*, was only interesting because it was a witness to the presence of ancient theology in Egypt, perhaps as a result of the diffusion of Moses' teaching among Egyptian priests. It could not take the place of the *Timaeus* and Proclus.²³

In our view, it was the long late antique and medieval tradition that encouraged Ficino to accept the agreement between the two great wise men of Antiquity, Plato and Hermes, independently of any possible similarity between the *Timaeus* and the *Asclepius*. Furthermore, the link between Mercury and Plato is also confirmed in

¹⁹ See *Ascl.* 34. This letter also quotes a triad of Latin texts used frequently, beginning in medieval philosophy, to attest to the existence of the world soul: Virgil, *Aen.* VI. 724–27 and *Ecl.* 3. 60 together with Lucan IX. 580.

²⁰ Gentile, 'In margine all'epistola', p. 48.

²¹ M. J. B. Allen, 'Marsilio Ficino, Hermes Trismegistus and the *Corpus Hermeticum*', in *New Perspectives on Renaissance Thought: Essays in the History of Science, Education and Philosophy in Memory of Charles B. Schmitt*, ed. by J. Henry and S. Hutton (London: Duckworth; Naples: Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici, 1990), pp. 38–47 (pp. 42–43).

²² Thus Allen takes a generally reductive stance to Ficino's Hermetism, since, in his view, Ficino never would have placed Hermetism on the same level as Platonism.

²³ These are Allen's conclusions, which will be reconsidered below (pp. 149–50).

Ficino's late works. First of all, there is the conviction that no names of God exist, a sign of apophatism (cf. *Ascl.* 20):

Thus in the *Parmenides* Plato demonstrates that we have no name, definition, or knowledge of God, since God is above the limits of our understanding. The same thing was said before him by Mercury, and after him by Dionysius the Areopagite [...]. It will suffice to purify and direct the mind after the proper search.²⁴ (*Argumentum ad epistolam secundam quae est Platonis ad Dionysium Siciliae tyrannum: Opera*, II, 1532)

God is therefore to be worshipped with silence full of devotion, with a pure mind, and not with external ceremonies (cf. *Ascl.* 41):

Mercury attributes the rest to the sacred silence of the mind. For he thinks that God can be named by the mind with a certain kind of silence rather than with speech.²⁵ (*Opera*, II, 1532)

Mercury and Plato, when worshipping the majesty of the supreme god, eliminated all external ceremonies and left only the pure ardour of the spirit.²⁶ (*In Alcibiadem secundum epitome: Opera*, II, 1135)

It was therefore not without reason that Parmenides warned that one must rely not so much upon negations as on tranquil, divine, loving silence. This is surely approved by all the Platonists along with Mercury and Apollonius of Tyana. And the prophet David said: 'Your praise, God, is silence.' (*In Parmenidem* 79: *Opera*, II, 1181)²⁷

²⁴ 'Hinc in Parmenide probat nos neque nomen neque definitionem neque scientiam habere de Deo, utpote qui sit super intelligentiae limites. Idem ante ipsum [scilicet Platonem] Mercurius asserit, idem post ipsum Dionysius Areopagita [...]. Sat ergo fuerit post convenientem inquisitionem purificasse mentem, atque direxisse.'

²⁵ 'Reliquum Mercurius sacro mentis silentio tribuit. Deum enim a mente suo quodam silentio potius quam sermone suo censet pronunciari.'

²⁶ 'Mercurius ac Plato, cum supremi numinis maiestatem venerabantur, externas omnes caerimoniae auferebant, solam ac puram flagrantiam animi relinquebant.'

²⁷ 'Quamobrem non iniuria Parmenides admonet, non tam negationibus quam silentio tranquillo, divino, amatorio confidendum. Quod quidem Platonici omnes una cum Mercurio et Apollonio Tyaneo procul dubio comprobant. Et propheta David inquit, laus tibi, o Deus, est silentium.' Other considerations on the agreement between Hermetism and Plato are found in the *In Minoem, vel de Lege, Epitome* (*Opera*, II, 1135): 'Quamobrem omnes illustres conditores legum inventionem legum in Deum, sed per diversa nomina atque media rettulerunt [...] Trismegistus Aegyptiis (Aegyptius?) in Mercurium' ('Therefore all illustrious founders attributed the invention of the laws to God, but with different names and by different means [...] Hermes the Egyptian to Mercury').

Hermetism and Orphism

Orphic doctrines are known to have enjoyed a wide diffusion in fifteenth-century Italy. When writing his commentary on Plotinus, Ficino considers the Orphic doctrine of the world's hermaphroditism: 'Thus Orpheus, just like Mercury, calls nature and worldly Jupiter "male and female"' (*In Plotinum 27: Opera*, II, 1744).²⁸

This is a reference to the *Asclepius* (chap. 20).²⁹ Likewise:

By means of this attraction, the wise men of India testify, the world binds itself together; and they say that the world is an animate being which is masculine and at the same time feminine throughout and that it everywhere links with itself in the mutual love of its members and so holds together; moreover, the bond of the members inheres through the ingrafted 'Mind, which is blended through the limbs and moves the whole bulk and mixes itself with the great body'.³⁰ Hence Orpheus called the very nature of the cosmos and the cosmic Jupiter 'masculine and feminine'.³¹ (*De vita caelitus comparanda* III. 26; translation Kaske and Clark, modified)

Two other testimonies connect Trismegistus's cosmogony to that of Orpheus:

In the *Argonautica*, when Orpheus, in the presence of Chiron and the heroes, sang about the beginnings of things, following the theology of Mercury Trismegistus, he placed Chaos before the World.³² (*In Convivium Platonis de amore, Commentarium* I. 3. ii; translation Jayne, modified)

Orpheus, then, came second, and Trismegistus was his master.

²⁸ 'Sic Orpheus naturam mundanumque Iovem marem appellat et foeminam, similiterque Mercurius.'

²⁹ For the reference to Orpheus, see frag. 168. 3, p. 201 Kern, as observed by O. Tarabochia Canavero (Marsilio Ficino, *Sulla vita*, ed. by Tarabochia Canavero (Milan: Rusconi, 1995), p. 232). Ficino probably took this long poetic fragment not from the Pseudo-Aristotelian *De mundo*, as Tarabochia Canavero thinks, but from Apuleius's *De mundo*, which quotes it in Greek (see 37. 372).

³⁰ This is a silent quotation of the well-known Vergilian passage, *Aeneid* VI. 726–27.

³¹ 'Quo quidem attractu secum ipso devinciri mundum testantur sapientes Indi, dicentes mundum esse animal passim masculinum, simulatque foeminam, mutuoque membrorum suorum amore ubique coire secum, atque ita constare, vinculum vero membrorum inesse per insitam sibi mentem, quae totam infusa per artus agitat molem et magno se corpore miscet. Hinc Orpheus naturam ipsam mundi Iovemque mundanum marem appellat et foeminam.'

³² Marsile Ficino, *Commentaire sur 'le Banquet' de Platon, De l'amour*, ed. and trans. by Pierre Laurens (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002), p. 9. 'Orpheus in Argonautica cum de rerum principiis coram Chirone heroibusque cantaret, Mercurii Trismegisti theologiam secutus, chaos ante mundum posuit.'

The other testimony is found in *Theologia Platonica* XVIII. 1. 7.³³ There it is said that Mercury also taught that the world subsists thanks to the will of God, 'quem cuncti comitentur affectus' (see *CH* x. 2–3; *Ascl.* 6. 20). And thus Orpheus, too, like Plato in the *Timaeus*, says that God's beneficent will was the most certain origin of things. In this case as well Orpheus must be thought of as taking his teaching from Mercury.

Hermes in the Succession of the Ancient Philosophers

The conviction that Orpheus had been a disciple of Mercury corresponds to Ficino's well-known conception of the succession of the philosophers, which goes from the most ancient times to Plato and continues down to the renewal of Platonic philosophy with Ficino himself. The first attempts at tracing a 'succession' of the most ancient philosophers can be found in the earliest treatises.³⁴ Ficino would find a similar succession of Platonic philosophers in Proclus's *Theologia Platonica*, which he probably read before 1463. The succession of Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, Philolaus, and Plato is found in the summary that Ficino wrote in MS 70 of the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence, which contains the *Theologia Platonica* and the *Institutiones* of Proclus.³⁵

But even before him Pletho had proposed a history of the most ancient philosophy in which Platonic philosophy derived from Zoroaster. Ficino is influenced by Pletho's interpretation, although he does not consistently respect its chronology. In the *argumentum* to his translation of the *Pimander*, Ficino makes Mercury the first link in the chain of the *prisci theologi*, whereas later on he gives this honour to Zoroaster.³⁶ This fluctuation probably has to do with the fact that when Ficino read Proclus and Plato a second time, he became convinced of Zoroaster's greater antiquity. In so doing he followed Pletho, whose attribution of greater antiquity to Zoroaster was also motivated by hostility towards Hermes. Woodhouse has noted that Pletho never cites Hermetic texts, although he had to have known

³³ References are to the edition of J. Hankins and M. J. B. Allen: Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, vols I–VI, English trans. by Allen with J. Warden, Latin text ed. by Hankins with W. Bowen, I Tatti Renaissance Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001–06).

³⁴ See S. Gentile, 'Le prime traduzioni dal greco di Marsilio Ficino', *Rinascimento*, 2nd series, 30 (1990), 57–104 (pp. 58–60).

³⁵ See Gentile, 'Le prime traduzioni dal greco', p. 59; Gentile, 'Ficino ed Ermete', pp. 22–23.

³⁶ See Gentile, 'Le prime traduzioni dal greco', pp. 60–62.

them.³⁷ Similar to Pletho's silence about Hermetism, Ficino never mentioned Zoroaster in the *argumentum* to his *Pimander*. Gentile proposes three possible reasons for this: that in 1463 Ficino had not yet read Pletho, who attributed great authority and antiquity to Zoroaster; that, translating Hermes, he wanted to give him greater importance; or that he remained bound to his Latin sources, which attributed greater antiquity to Hermes.³⁸ But in this conviction that Hermes was more ancient and authoritative than Zoroaster, Ficino was influenced above all by the fact that the latter's reputation was tied, as everyone knew, to magic. Besides, the patristic and medieval tradition considered Hermes a great prophet and a wise man, whose doctrines were close to those of Christ. Nothing of the sort could be said for Zoroaster. In the preface to his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Ficino takes up Augustine's considerations, giving them a more openly positive meaning than they actually had in Augustine's work. Indeed, Augustine had said that Hermes was very ancient, but still later than Moses (*De civ. Dei* XVIII. 39).

Nevertheless, Ficino would not always hold this conviction. Allen observes that later, beginning with the 1469 translation of the *Philebus* (see *In Philebum* 17 (*Opera*, II, 1223) and 26 (II, 1233)), Ficino reworks his concept of *prisca theologia*, which he presents again later in his *De Christiana religione* (chap. 22).³⁹ Born among the Persians under Zoroaster and among the Egyptians under Hermes, then nourished in Thrace under Orpheus and Aglaophemus (as Proclus had said earlier), *prisca theologia* achieved its first diffusion thanks to Pythagoras in Italy, and later it reached its full maturity in Athens with Plato ('tota in Platonis nostri voluminibus continetur'). Mercury, then, is no longer the holy founder of ancient theology.

Allen, however, does not stop at observing that over time Zoroaster appears to Ficino to be more ancient; in his view, the Persian wise man also became more and more authoritative.⁴⁰ But the presence of Zoroaster — that is, of the *Oracula Chaldaica* — in Ficino's philosophy is anything but clear. It seems to me that we are not in a position to ask whether Hermes or Zoroaster was more important. Instead it seems possible only to confirm the 'cohabitation' of these two mythical personages,

³⁷ C. M. Woodhouse, *George Gemistos Plethon: The Last of the Hellenes* (Oxford: University Press, 1986), pp. 59–60.

³⁸ Gentile, 'Le prime traduzioni dal greco', pp. 69–71; on the problem of Zoroaster's place in *prisca theologia* in Ficino's eyes, see also Gentile, 'Ficino ed Ermete', pp. 22–23.

³⁹ M. J. B. Allen, *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation* (Florence: Olschki, 1998), pp. 24–26.

⁴⁰ Allen, *Synoptic Art*, pp. 31–41.

who, at any rate, gradually recede into the background in the face of the growing preponderance of Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy.⁴¹

The succession of Zoroaster, Mercury, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato is found yet again in the *Theologia Platonica* (XVII. 1. 2), where the succession of the seven greatest philosophers is presented: Zoroaster, Mercury, *princeps sacerdotum Aegyptiorum*, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, and Plato; the same is found in *Theologia Platonica* VI. 1. 7.⁴² The *prisci theologi*, Ficino observes again (*Theol. Plat.* XII. 1. 14), always united the study of philosophy with *religiosa pietas*. The writings of Zoroaster bear witness to this, as does the fact that Mercury's treatises always begin with a prayer and end with a sacrifice.

Hermetism and Christianity

What drew Ficino to Hermetism? We find some hints about his interest for this aspect of *prisca theologia* in the introduction to his translation of the *Pimander*. Hermes wrote about divine things, and secret mysteries and marvellous oracles appear in his book. In fact, he does not speak as a philosopher but as a prophet, foretelling the future ruin of the Egyptian religion, the birth of a new faith, the coming of the Saviour, the last judgement, the glory of the blessed, and the punishment of the damned. Ficino knows that Augustine had accused Hermes of having received his prophetic powers by means of astrology or, what is worse, from demons (see *De civ. Dei* VIII. 23). Yet Augustine's position is counterbalanced by that of Lactantius, who, as we have seen, unceasingly exalts Trismegistus's quasi-Christian teaching, as well as by the reputation Hermes had in medieval culture.

⁴¹ The problem of the succession of *prisca theologia* has recently been re-examined by M. Idel, 'Prisca Theologia in Marsilio Ficino and in Some Jewish Treatments', in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, ed. by M. J. B. Allen and V. Rees with M. Davies (Leiden: Brill, 2002), pp. 137–58. Idel takes up the question of the Renaissance conception of the various modes (a unilinear or multilinear mode?) in which the truth was transmitted from the most ancient of times to Plato. He especially has noted that Hebraic mysticism must be recognized among these 'modes' of Hermetism's diffusion in medieval culture: M. Idel, 'Book of God and Book of Law in Late 15th Century Florence', *Accademia*, 2 (2000), 7–17, with additional bibliography.

⁴² Ficino continues his history of the ancient Platonic tradition thus: since these most ancient philosophers hid the divine mysteries under *poetica umbracula* to keep them secret from the profane, various interpreters arose. There were six academies: three Attic ones (old, begun by Xenocrates; middle, begun by Archesilaus; new, begun by Carneades) and three foreign ones (Egyptian, with Ammonius; Roman, with Plotinus; Lycian, with Proclus).

Therefore, like Lactantius and many medieval philosophers, Ficino, too, is convinced that Hermetism and Trinitarian theology have much in common.

The agreement between Hermetism and Christianity is also corroborated by other passages of later works. The Hermetic doctrine according to which God can be said to be everything and nothing (*CH* v. 10) foretells (thanks to Plato's intermediation) that of the 'divine names' of the Platonist Dionysius the Areopagite (we saw another testimony of this above):

The mysteries of Dionysius are corroborated by that famous sentence of thrice-great Mercury. God, he says, is no thing. God is all things. God has no name, God has every name.⁴³ (*in Dionysii Areopagitae librum de Divinis nominibus Commentatio: Opera*, II, 1034)

In fact, Dionysius, being a Christian, is Plato's legitimate heir, much more so than the pagan Platonists.⁴⁴ He is 'the peak of Platonic thought and the summit of Christian theology' (*in Dionysii Areopagitae librum de Divinis nominibus Commentatio* II. 1013);⁴⁵ and again:

We think that Dionysius must be preferred not only to all other Platonists, since Platonic doctrine reached its peak in him, but also to Plato himself, on account of the new light of Christian truth.⁴⁶ (*in Dionysii Areopagitae librum de Divinis nominibus Commentatio: Opera*, II, 1024)

To explain this agreement between the great philosophers of the past and Dionysius the Areopagite, Ficino maintained (thus following Lactantius and the medieval theologians, as we have seen) that Hermes had glimpsed, albeit confusedly, the mystery of the Trinity. Not being Christian, however, he was not able to formulate it correctly, just as Zoroaster had been unable to do so:

⁴³ 'Mysteria Dionysii sententia illa Mercurii ter maximi confirmantur. Deus, inquit, nihil est omnium. Deus est omnia. Deus nomen nullum habet, Deus habet omne nomen.'

⁴⁴ On the history of *prisca theologia* culminating with Christian revelation, see, in addition to what has been observed above, W. A. Euler, '*Pia philosophia*' et '*docta religio*': *Theologie und Religion bei Marsilio Ficino und Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (Munich: Fink, 1998), pp. 220–24.

⁴⁵ 'Platonicae disciplinae culmen et Christianae Theologiae columnen.' On Ficino and Dionysius the Areopagite, see now (in addition to the bibliography indicated by Euler) St. Toussaint, 'L'Influence de Ficino à Paris et le Pseudo-Denys des Humanistes: Traversari, Cusain, Lefèvre d'Étaples. Suivi d'un passage inédit de Marsile Ficini', *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 5 (1999), 381–414; C. Vasoli, 'L'"Un-Bien" dans le commentaire de Ficino à la *Mystica Theologia* du Pseudo-Denys', in *Marsile Ficino: les platonismes à la Renaissance*, ed. by P. Magnard (Paris: Vrin, 2001), pp. 181–93.

⁴⁶ 'ipsum (scil. Dionysium) [...] non solum caeteris Platonis propter doctrinam Platonicae culmen, verum etiam ipsi Platoni propter novum veritatis Christianae lumen, anteponendum esse censemus'.

Zoroaster and Mercury also attributed to God an intellectual offspring. They will have said what they were able, and then certainly with God's help. But God alone, and he to whom God may have wished to reveal it, understands this thing.⁴⁷ (*In epistulas D. Pauli commentatio* 2: *Opera*, I, 430)

Mercury Trismegistus often mentions the Word and the Son of God, and even the Spirit.⁴⁸ (*De Christiana religione* 13: *Opera*, I, 18)

In conclusion, as in his youthful works of 1457, which he wrote before becoming acquainted with the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the more mature Ficino was also interested in Hermes as a prophet of Christianity's triumph over ancient religion and as a precursor to the most profound Christian mystery. This had been the medieval interpretation of the *Asclepius*. It was probably that exegetical tradition that drove Ficino to ignore Augustine's criticisms (despite Augustine's authority) and to opt for Lactantius's interpretation.

What is more, for those who, like Ficino, desired to establish a long lineage for ancient philosophies from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Egypt lent itself perfectly to such a reconstruction. A scriptural witness might have been useful in this respect. According to Acts 7. 22, Moses had been expert in all Egyptian wisdom. From this source one could then deduce what was already implicit in the Christian Hermetism of Late Antiquity, namely that Moses had taught the priests of Egypt the truths of monotheism,⁴⁹ which had then been adulterated.⁵⁰ The adulteration of the ancient Hermetic teaching could be seen, for example, in the Egyptians' use of magic and in their relations with demons, which Augustine had in due course deplored.⁵¹

⁴⁷ 'Zoroaster quoque una cum Mercurio intellectualem Deo prolem attribuit. Dixerint isti quidem quod potuerunt, et id quidem adiuvante Deo, Deus autem hoc solus intelligit, et cui Deus revelare voluerit.'

⁴⁸ 'Mercurius Trismegistus de Verbo et Filio Dei, ac etiam de Spiritu saepe mentionem facit.'

⁴⁹ This conviction was maintained in ancient Christianity above all by Cyril of Alexandria (see p. 85); a study on Cyril's place in fifteenth-century Christian culture would be extremely useful.

⁵⁰ According to Augustine (*De civ. Dei* XVIII. 39, a passage we have seen several times), Hermes lived at least two generations after Moses; others, however, thought that Hermes had been a contemporary of Moses, as can be seen in the famous depiction on the floor of the cathedral in Siena, where Trismegistus is called *contemporaneus Moysi*.

⁵¹ At this point one could pose the problem, with C. Salaman ('Echoes of Egypt in Hermes and Ficino', in *Marsilio Ficino*, ed. by Allen and Rees with Davies, pp. 115–35), of whether, since real elements of Egyptian religion truly can be found in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (as recent scholarship has now definitively ascertained), such elements were taken up by Ficino. Salaman's attempt to demonstrate this is not, in my view, convincing.

Hermes and Magic

The problem of magic has been much debated, even if it is not central (in my view) to Ficino's Hermetism. Frances Yates observed in a justly famous essay that Ficino was confronted by two contrary attitudes on the part of the Fathers towards Hermetism: on the one hand there was the conciliatory and favorable position of Lactantius, on the other the hostile and negative one of Augustine, who focused his attack on Hermes' use of magic and demonic inspiration.⁵² Ficino essentially took note of Augustine's condemnation (*De civ. Dei* VIII. 23–26) without adhering to it. And in effect it was impossible, either for Ficino or for his readers, to ignore this very dangerous passage of the *Asclepius* (chap. 26), which spoke of the 'creation' of gods by means of the construction of statues into which a magical spirit could be placed. Furthermore, according to Augustine, Hermes had been able to foretell the end of ancient Egyptian religion (again in the *Ascl.*: chaps 24–25) because he had been inspired by a demon. Hermes, then, had had contact with demons and used magic.

Copenhaver, however, thinks he can clear Ficino of the charge of magic. For however interested in magic Ficino might have been, he did not go in search of passages relating to it in Hermetic texts, which offer little theoretical information. Instead, if at all, he turned to Plotinus and Proclus (who, however, in my view do not say much more).⁵³ In fact, in the third book of his *De vita* Ficino makes no attempt to justify his theory of magic on the basis of the fourteen treatises of the *Corpus Hermeticum* that he had translated, as they would have been of no use to that end.⁵⁴ Hermes' magic is mentioned in only three passages, and only twice in explicit connection with his name. In *De vita* III. 12 (*Opera*, I, 548) Ficino mentions the magic of the Egyptians and of the *Asclepius*, citing Mercury by name; in *De vita* III. 20 (*Opera*, I, 561) the reference to magic is much more generic, whereas in *De vita* III. 26 (*Opera*, I, 571) Ficino connects Plotinus to Mercury, and he once again makes reference to the *Asclepius*:

⁵² F. A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), pp. 66–83 *passim*.

⁵³ B. Copenhaver, 'Iamblichus, Synesius and the Chaldaean Oracles in Marsilio Ficino's *De vita libri tres*: Hermetic Magic or Neoplatonic Magic?', in *Supplementum Festivum: Studies in Honor of Paul Oskar Kristeller*, ed. by J. Hankins, J. Monfasani, and F. Purnell, Jr (New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1987), pp. 441–55 (pp. 441–42).

⁵⁴ See Copenhaver, 'Iamblichus, Synesius', p. 443.

Plotinus uses almost the same examples in that place where, paraphrasing Hermes Trismegistus, he says that the ancient priests or Magi used to capture in statues and material sacrifices something divine and wonderful.⁵⁵ (translation Kaske and Clark)

These passages do not so much contain a reference to philosophical arguments in support of magic as references to the venerable authority of Hermes. Ficino seeks to demonstrate that the magic that 'constructs' gods, as spoken of in the *Asclepius*, is effective, that is to say that the artificial and material structure of a talisman or a statue can result in its being inhabited or animated by a spiritual being, that is, a demon. And at any rate, he also seeks to affirm in a veiled way that such magic can be illicit, that is, an act of idolatry. In another point of his study Copenhaver also tends to 'neutralize' Ficino's references to Hermetic magic (i.e. to see them as pure and simple pieces of 'historical' information),⁵⁶ and he argues that the *Hermetica* furnished Ficino with a justification for believing in magic that was more of a genealogical or historical than a theoretical kind.⁵⁷ The fact that magic was associated with Hermes' ancient theology could have made it more worthy of awe, but the 'ancient' theologians (Hermes, Zoroaster, Orpheus) were of little use for analysing magic from a physical or philosophical point of view. Hermetic allusions to magical concepts were used frequently enough to associate magic with *prisca theologia*, but they did not contain any physical or philosophical information of the kind that could provide the building blocks of a convincing and valid theory of magic. The popular *Hermetica* diffused during the Middle Ages were more important than the *Corpus Hermeticum* as a source of information about magic, but, since they were above all collections of recipes or curiosities not connected to any coherent philosophy, their theoretical value was not large, and at any rate Ficino was not interested in them.

⁵⁵ 'His ferme exemplis ipse Plotinus utitur, ubi Mercurium imitatus ait veteres sacerdotes sive Magos in statu sacrificiisque sensibilibus [in sensibilibus: Ficino's edition] divinum aliquid et mirandum suscipere solitos.'

⁵⁶ B. Copenhaver, 'Hermes Trismegistus, Proclus, and the Question of a Philosophy of Magic in the Renaissance', in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by I. Merkel and A. G. Debus (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988), pp. 79–105 (pp. 80 and 95); Copenhaver, 'Iamblichus, Synesius', p. 448. Copenhaver's interpretation, which seeks to rule out in Ficino (and also in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, by which Ficino was inspired) all profound interest in magic, has been wholeheartedly rejected by P. Zambelli, *L'ambigua natura della magia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), pp. 282–83, 301, 317–19 (a collection of previously published essays), who, following Garin's conception, denies the scientific and historical validity of a clear separation between magic and philosophy.

⁵⁷ Copenhaver, 'Hermes Trismegistus', p. 93.

Yet we do not think that Ficino's interest in magic must be so radically redefined (such as to appear almost a negation of it). In any case there is surely no lack of witnesses from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who thought Ficino had been compromised by such practices.⁵⁸

Allen's interpretation is equally restrictive.⁵⁹ He claims that the solution to the thorny problem of Ficino's complicated relations with magic, which also could have entailed an accusation of betraying the Christian faith, is provided by Ficino in his *De vita* III. 26 (*Opera*, I, 571):

Plotinus uses almost the same examples in that place where, paraphrasing Mercury, he says that the ancient priests or Magi used to capture in statues and material sacrifices something divine and wonderful. He holds, moreover, with Mercury that through these materials they did not, properly speaking, capture divinities wholly separate from matter but deities who are merely cosmic, as I said from the beginning and as Synesius demonstrates [...]. Indeed, the same Mercury, whom Plotinus follows, holds that demons of this kind — airy ones, not celestial, let alone any higher — are themselves present all along in the materials and that Hermes himself put together statues from herbs, trees, stones, and spices, which had within themselves, as he says, a natural force of divinity. He added songs resembling the heavenly bodies; he says the divinities take delight in such songs and so stay a longer time in the statues and help people or harm them. He adds that once the wise men of Egypt, who were also priests, since they were unable to persuade the people by reasoning that there were gods, that is, certain spirits superior to mankind, thought up this magical lure through which they could allure demons into the statues and thereby show that divinities exist [...]. But now let us get back to Mercury, or rather to Plotinus. Mercury says that the priests received an appropriate power from the nature of the cosmos and mixed it. Plotinus follows him and thinks that everything can be easily accomplished by the intermediation of the *Anima Mundi*.⁶⁰ (translation Kaske and Clark, modified)

⁵⁸ See C. Buccolini, '*Explicatio Ficini*: Intorno alla presenza di Ficino nei testi di Mersenne', *Accademia* 3 (2001), 53–93 (pp. 53–55).

⁵⁹ Allen, 'Marsilio Ficino, Hermes Trismegistus', pp. 43–46.

⁶⁰ 'His ferme exemplis ipse Plotinus utitur, ubi Mercurium imitatus ait veteres sacerdotes sive Magos in statu sacrificiisque sensibilibus divinum aliquid et mirandum suscipere solitos. Vult autem una cum Trismegisto per materialia haec non proprie suscipi numina penitus a materia segregata, sed mundana tantum, ut ab initio dixi, et Synesius approbat [...]. Mercurius ipse, quem Plotinus sequitur, inquit daemones aërios non coelestes, nedum sublimiores, statuasque Mercurius ipse componit ex herbis, arboribus, lapidibus, aromatis, naturalem vim divinitatis (ut ait ipse) in se habentibus. Adiungit cantus caelestibus similes, quibus ait eos delectari, statuque sic adesse diutius, et prodesse hominibus vel obesse. Addit sapientes quondam Aegyptios, qui et sacerdotes erant, quum non possent rationibus persuadere populo esse Deos, id est spiritus aliquos super homines, excogitasse Magicum hoc illicium, quo daemones allicientes in statuas esse numina declararent [...]. Sed ad Mercurium immo ad Plotinum iam revertamur. Mercurius sacerdotes ait accepisse virtutem

Thus Ficino maintains that the Egyptian wise men were unable to convince their people that there were gods or spirits presiding over mankind, and thus, abandoning Hermes' teaching, invented the illicit magic of statues and claimed that the demons lured into them were in fact gods. Iamblichus, whom Ficino 'discovered' at a much later point in his life, had condemned the Egyptians precisely for having worshiped demons in their own right instead of recalling that they should only serve as intermediaries for us in our investigation of divine mysteries (see *On the Mysteries* VIII. 2).

But according to Allen, at the end of his life Ficino introduces a new element, maintaining that the Egyptian priests, when they consecrated their temples to the gods, also set up statues in them of men whom they thought had been particularly subjected to the influence of those divinities. In these statues they incorporated figures of animals, woods, metals, stones, and also special characters and images associated with the gods. In sum, Hermes was only *the witness*, not the defender, of this Egyptian practice.

Thrice-great Mercury attests that the fathers of the Egyptian religion were in the habit of placing statues constructed by a magical art in their temples, and that they summoned into them demons and the souls of the dead.⁶¹ (*In epistulas D. Pauli commentatio* 8: *Opera*, I, 440)

Even more revealing of Ficino's attitude is, finally, according to Allen, a passage in which Ficino thinks that Hermes condemned the majority of Egyptians for not believing either that gods existed above the heavens or that the prayers of men who inhabited the earth could reach them. This was the reason why they made statues for demons to live in, which they worshiped as familiar gods:

If you consult Trismegistus, you will learn that a statue correctly put together from the world's own materials, those which are in harmony with a particular demon, will be immediately animated by the demon in harmony with it [...]. You will also hear this Trismegistus condemning the majority of the ancients because they had no faith either in the existence of spirits above the heavens or in the possibility of the prayers of earth-bound men ever rising up to the heavenly spirits or to those above the heavens. Therefore, they had made statues as dwellings for demons, whom they worshipped as familiar gods. To be sure, Trismegistus thought that, although beneficial demons are occasionally summoned

à mundi natura convenientem, eamque miscuisse. Sequutus hunc Plotinus, putat totum in anima mundi conciliante facile confici posse.'

⁶¹ 'Mercurius ter maximus testis est religionis Aegyptiae patres statuas in templis arte magica fabricatas collocare consuevisse, et in eas daemones defunctorumque animas excitare.'

into the sanctuaries, yet often harmful demons descend.⁶² (*In Apologiam Socratis epitome: Opera*, II, 1389; translation Allen, *Synoptic Art*, modified)

According to Allen's conclusion, Hermes appears in these various quotations more as a reformer of idolatrous beliefs than as a founder of magical theories.⁶³ Indeed, for Ficino the problem of magic would not have been the existence or efficacy of magical statues, which he did not contest, but their licitness from a religious (and thus also from a civic) standpoint. In Allen's view, Ficino knew that Hermetism was connected to magic, and he sought to purify it. Thus his attitude had to have been influenced by Augustine's condemnation of Hermetism.

It is difficult to arrive at a definitive solution. It is likely that practical reasons caused Ficino to proceed with extreme caution when he had to speak about magic, such as when it cropped up in the texts he cherished the most, like those of Hermes and Iamblichus.⁶⁴ For his part, Plato himself had openly and harshly condemned magic in his *Laws*. It is true that in other passages Ficino appears more 'neutral' and 'doxographical', such as the following:

And as Mercury Trismegistus initially *taught*, and long afterwards Plotinus and Iamblichus, demons are somehow enclosed in certain statues constructed with a specific order.⁶⁵ (*In Cratylum [...] epitome: Opera*, II, 1309; translation Kaske and Clarke, modified)

And in the *Theologia Platonica* (XIII. 3. 1), Ficino also reports, as an example of the efficacy of the various arts, that according to Mercury the Egyptians constructed statues of gods that spoke and walked. The effects of various magical *miracula* are described in the same context (XIII. 5); Mercury Trismegistus also mentions them when speaking about palingenesis with his son Tat (*CH* XII. 16, XIII. 14). Or, in *Theologia Platonica* XVIII. 10. 13, Ficino states that some people say that souls do not specifically make up the *corpus elementale terrenum*, nor do they have sensations through it, but that,

⁶² 'Si Trismegistum consulueris, disces ex propriis mundi materiis certo cuidam daemone congruentibus compositam rite statuam confestim per daemonem congruum animari [...]. Audies quoque Mercurium hunc veteres plerosque damnantem, quod diffidentes vel esse numina super coelum, vel terrenorum vota ad caelestia superioraque pervenire, fabricavere statuas habitacula daemonum, quos quasi familiares colerent deos. Putabat sane, quamvis interdum in delubra daemones salutare advocarentur, saepe tamen descendere noxios.'

⁶³ Allen, 'Marsilio Ficino, Hermes Trismegistus', p. 45.

⁶⁴ On this issue, see Zambelli, *L'ambigua natura*, pp. 46–52 and elsewhere.

⁶⁵ 'Et quemadmodum ab initio *docuit* Mercurius Trismegistus ac diu postea Plotinus et Iamblichus, statu is quibusdam ordine certo compositis daemones quodammodo includentur.'

just as the daemons are bound as it were to statues by the magic art and through the pre-determined disposition of the statues (a disposition accommodated to certain daemons) — and this Mercurius maintains as does Plotinus⁶⁶ — so souls who have devoted themselves to bodies are delivered up by divine law to water and fire, and this indeed in such a slavish manner that they vehemently rage and grieve because of it.⁶⁷ (translation Allen, *Platonic Theology*, vol. VI (Books 17–18))

But it is necessary to consider these seemingly objective and detached passages in their more general context. Now, more recent scholarship has increasingly tended to emphasize Ficino's interest, in the last years of his life, in various forms of magic and related forms of mysteriosophy. Evidence of this is provided by his increasingly frequent references to Cabala and to Arabic philosophy, which he seems to have known directly.⁶⁸ It is in this context, then, that his references to Hermetic magic must also be situated, even if they do seem to be detached and asepitic. Of course, Ficino's interest is in philosophical magic, not its more popular variety. Therefore, W. Hanegraaff correctly rejects Walker's distinction between 'magic' and 'religion'⁶⁹ as being of little use for certain currents of Renaissance thought. Ficino's reticence, and the contrast between his interest in magic and his explicit submission to the authority of the Church, declared in the preface to the *De vita caelitus comparanda*, is probably not due solely to fear of ecclesiastical censure, but to an actual personal uncertainty about the worth of these theosophies.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ See *Ascl.* 7; Plotinus III. 5. 6.

⁶⁷ 'sicut arte magica per certam statuarum dispositionem daemonibus certis accommodatam daemones statuis quasi devinciuntur, quod Mercurius confitetur atque Plotinus, sic lege divina animas, quae se corporibus dediderunt, aquae mancipari vel igni, atque id quidem adeo serviliter ut ob hoc vehementer indignantur atque doleant'.

⁶⁸ See recently St. Toussaint, 'L'individuo estatico: Tecniche profetiche in Marsilio Ficino e Giovanni Pico della Mirandola', *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 6 (2000), 351–79.

⁶⁹ D. P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, Studies of the Warburg Institute, 22 (London: Warburg Institute, 1958), pp. 51, 75–84.

⁷⁰ W. J. Hanegraaff, *Sympathy or the Devil: Renaissance Magic and the Ambivalence of Idols*, <<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/Sympdevil.html>> [accessed August 2011]. N. Weill-Parot, when briefly describing the 'status quaestionis' of the dispute between Zambelli and Copenhaver, justly observed that 'even without a hypocritical prudence [...] the two points of view did not seem irreconcilable to him' (Weill-Parot, 'Penombre ficinienne: le renouveau de la théorie de la magie talismanique et ses ambiguïtés', in *Marsile Ficino, ou Les Mystères platoniciens: Actes du XLIIIe Colloque International d'Etudes Humanistes, Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de la Renaissance, Tours, 7–10 juillet 1999*, ed. by St. Toussaint (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002), pp. 71–90 (p. 74)). He also returned to the topic in a well-informed essay (N. Weill-Parot, *Les 'Images astrologiques' au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance: spéculations intellectuelles et pratiques magiques (XII^e–XV^e siècle)* (Paris: Champion, 2002), pp. 639–708), in which he takes an intermediate position between those who

Other Elements of Ficino's Hermetism

In this regard as well scholarship tends to be essentially reductive. Copenhaver maintains that, in his writings as a whole, Ficino's quotations of Mercury appear simply in a doxography in which Hermes is one of the most ancient authorities.⁷¹ That is to say, Ficino makes recourse to Hermes sometimes to affirm a doctrine of his own, which appears to be supported by a Hermetic text, or, more often, to present a proper Hermetic doctrine, to which, however, he does not attribute particular significance.

Allen also believes that, all things considered, Ficino remains tepid towards Hermes.⁷² He does not have the unbounded admiration for him of a Lazzarelli, and he does not place the *Corpus Hermeticum* on the same plane as Plato and Plotinus. In Allen's view, Trismegistus's secondary status in Ficino's philosophy is confirmed by the fact that Ficino did not write commentaries to Hermes' works. Moreover, despite his initial interest for Hermes as a prophet and theologian, he gradually turned to Trismegistus less and less and instead developed an admiration for the Neoplatonists, particularly Plotinus and Proclus. In sum, Ficino was never a Hermetist, and the impact of the *Corpus Hermeticum* on him was initial and limited, although not without interest, especially in the realm of theories on magic. In Ficino's eyes, Allen argues, Hermes' authority rested on his having been a sage-theologian and prophet, and especially a reformer who had warned the Egyptians not to worship statues and not to practice rituals honoring demons.

Let us therefore examine certain attestations to Ficino's interest in Hermetism found in his greatest work, the *Theologia Platonica*, and more precisely those that regard the theosophy's essential themes — the world, the soul, man — to see if this limiting interpretation is valid.

What appears in *Theologia Platonica* XVII. 4. 6 is certainly doxographical. According to this passage, Plato describes the creation of the world more or less in the same way as Moses, who was the first to speak of it, and Mercury, who was next.⁷³ Then

deny Ficino's magic and those who see Ficino as highly receptive to every form of magic, and he concludes (pp. 705–08) that 'in reality, Ficino plays on a series of ambiguities. He shows that he knows, and he hides behind the "non tam probo quam narro"'. In any case, Ficino constitutes an important chapter in the history of learned magic generally.

⁷¹ Copenhaver, 'Hermes theologus', p. 78.

⁷² Allen, 'Marsilio Ficino, Hermes Trismegistus', p. 46.

⁷³ A reference to the myth is found in the eleventh treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, one of those closest to Christian cosmogony. It should be noted that Ficino places Mercury chronologically after Moses.

came Severus, Atticus, Plutarch, and many other Platonists, on account of which the Pythagorean Numenius exclaimed that Plato was an Attic-speaking Moses (see frag. 8 des Places;⁷⁴ this statement of Numenius, taken from Eusebius of Caesarea's *Praeparatio Evangelica* and translated into Latin right at the time Ficino was working, was extremely popular in the course of Platonism's rebirth in the Renaissance).

In I. 3. 15 Ficino reports that matter, as Mercury Trismegistus and Timaeus maintain, is 'without form. It is not nothing, but it is next to nothing, being primarily and to an unlimited extent that which is acted upon' (cf. *CH* VI. 2; *Ascl.* 4).⁷⁵

In XVIII. 1. 14 we enter more deeply into the problem of cosmology. Ficino writes that God, with his infinite power, created the world *ex nihilo*; for he did it with his own free will, not by the necessity of nature. Such an origin of the world was clearly explained by Thrice-great Hermes. It should not seem strange that he knew these things, if Mercury was the same as Moses, as the historian Artapanus demonstrated with many conjectures. The reference is to the information furnished by Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* XI. 37. 6.

In XI. 4. 14 Ficino observes that the forms are more *perspicuae* in the workman than in his work or in his instruments, and thus the forms of the universe are more *perspicuae* in God than in the universe. For this reason Mercury believes that the world is 'omniformis Dei imaginem omniformem' (a reference to *CH* V. 10, X. 16, according to Marcel, but it could also be to *Ascl.* 19, although in a totally different context).

In IV. 2. 5 Ficino states that the end of the world is called *mundi senium* by Mercury (*Ascl.* 26), *mundi restitutio* by Plato in *libro de Regno* (*Polit.* 270a). In reality, palingenesis will come after the world's senescence, that is, the world will return to its primordial order, as is taught not only by Moses but also by Zoroaster, Mercury (*Ascl.* 26), and Plato.

Regarding the soul, Zoroaster and Hermes say (the reference is to *CH* I. 8) that it descends from the full circle of the universe, and the lowest intelligence is united first of all with the highest body, and not only are they united, but the former is breathed into the latter (*Theol. Plat.* XVIII. 4). Ficino also believes in the existence

⁷⁴ Numenius, *Fragments*, ed. and trans. by É. des Places (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1973).

⁷⁵ 'informe, non nihil, nihil proximum, quod primo infiniteque sit patiens'. In addition to this more obvious reference to the Platonic doctrine of matter, it has been argued (S. Kodera, 'Narcissus, Divine Gazes and Bloody Mirrors: The Concept of Matter in Ficino', in *Marsilio Ficino*, ed. by Allen and Rees with Davies, pp. 285–306) that the relationship between mind and matter, veiled under the myth of Narcissus, is found in Ficino, who took it from a passage of the *CH* (I. 14) and developed it in the *Theologia Platonica*.

of a 'vehicle of the soul', which he calls *idolum* and Plato *species animae mortalis* (*Tim.* 69c). The soul, when it is in the celestial body, emits an *idolum*, as if it were a *crinita coma*. As an *idolum*, it has inside itself a 'phantasia [...] irrationalis atque confusa', and each time it leaves its earthly body and is gathered into its celestial body, man hears wondrous music and voices coming from the heavens. This is also confirmed by Tat's exclamation, after he had been purified by ceremonies and his father's expiations (*CH* XIII. 11–22), and Mercury himself tells of having had this experience in the ecstasy of his soul (*CH* I. 1, XIII. 3).

Furthermore, our souls, which resemble celestial spirits, clothe themselves in bodies of different forms, and at the end of certain periods of time they take back the same bodies they had at the beginning. Zoroaster calls this process 'palin-genesis', and Mercury talks about it at length with his son Tat (*Theol. Plat.* XVII. 3. 5; cf. *Ascl.* 25–26).

Palingenesis entails for Ficino, as it had for the Neoplatonists, the problem of which body the soul will transmigrate into. Ficino confronts it a little later (*Theol. Plat.* XVII. 4), saying that not even the priests of Egypt agree in thinking that transmigration of souls can occur from one species to another; on the contrary, they want it to be understood as depending on the constitution of the soul, whether it is that of a beast or a hero, such that a man will become a beast or a hero, since in their view man is represented by the soul alone. This is explained by Mercury, *Aegyptiorum pontifex maximus*, who, having described this migration poetically, added that divine law does not permit human souls to migrate into the bodies of beasts. Furthermore, he allots to impious souls eternal punishments in the lowest elements of this world, and those souls are eternally condemned to everlasting torture. Mercury also says that the mind will be united with God so closely that it can no longer be brought into error (*CH* X. 19–22). The same problem is also discussed in XVIII. 10. 3. Plato and Mercury say that evil souls, after this life, when changing their demon fall under the power of an evil demon (see *Ascl.* 28), and this happens after they have been conducted by their *genius* to the judge who cannot be fooled. And a little later: the evil are tormented, in the moment of death and thereafter, by their furious imagination and the evil demon, as Mercury and Plato say (*Gorgias* 524d–525e). Similarly, in the commentary on Plotinus (VIII. 5 = *Opera*, II, 1755), we read: 'Sinful souls are tormented more harshly by demons, too, as Mercury, Orpheus, and Iamblichus affirm' (see *Ascl.* 12, above, p. 72).⁷⁶

⁷⁶ 'Peccantes vero gravius vexantur etiam a daemonibus, quod Mercurius et Orpheus, Iamblicusque confirmant.'

We have seen that Ficino joins Christian revelation with Hermetic doctrine. After citing John the Evangelist, who says that the soul that sees the truth works the truth (I John 1. 6), and Paul, who says that the soul that contemplates is renewed daily (II Cor. 4. 16), Ficino (*Theol. Plat.* XII. 2. 3) observes that Trismegistus says in the same way that the union of the pure mind with God results, so to speak, in one single spirit (cf. *Ascl.* 3; *CH* I. 26, XII. 4; *Ascl.* 10).

Regarding man, *Theologia Platonica* XIV. 3. 2 takes up the Hermetic doctrine that man is a *magnum miraculum* (*Ascl.* 6). Mankind seeks to become every thing, because it leads every kind of life. A famous passage of the *Asclepius* is cited as an example: 'qui genus daemonum noverit quasi natura cognatum, quive in deum transeat, quasi ipse sit deus'.⁷⁷ Having been estranged from their primordial equilibrium, human beings reach happiness with great difficulty, but they will achieve it easily when they have been returned to their original condition. This opinion seems to agree more than the others with the mysteries of Zoroaster, Mercury, Plato, and all the poets who described the Golden Age (*Theol. Plat.* XVIII. 9. 14). One of the most authoritative of them is an *oraculum* of Vergil (*Aen.* VI. 730–31) in which the Latin poet, partly following Mercury, partly Plato, describes the four disturbances of the soul resulting from the four humours: from burning bile comes desire; from blood, which is air, pleasure; from black bile, which is earth, fear; from watery mucus pain and weariness (cf. *CH* I. 23–24).

Conclusions

In light of all the evidence we have presented, the opinion of Copenhaver and Allen seems to us too radical. Ficino's interest in Hermetism does not pass away over time. Even at the end of his life, in a famous passage of the *Commentary on Plotinus*, he still attributed a primary role in his own early development to Hermetic doctrines, and they accompanied him to the end of his mature speculation, even if it was essentially that of a Platonic philosopher. Nor did his growing interest in Plato and Neoplatonism necessitate putting Hermetism on a lower level. We have already seen that this clear separation between Hermetism and

⁷⁷ This idea is also developed in Ficino's *De Christiana religione*, inc. lat. H 7069; BMC, VI 625; IGI, II 3857, c. 36r, which insists on the necessity of God's infinite goodness (*quae se communicare vult omnibus*) being united with human nature, which is the centre, the middle of all things in which all things are contained. I take this information from C. Vasoli, *Filosofia e religione nella cultura del Rinascimento* (Napoli: Guida, 1988), p. 53. Vasoli, 'Il *De Christiana Religione* di Marsilio Ficino', *Bruniana & Campanelliana*, 13 (2007), 403–28 (pp. 415–16).

Neoplatonism is of little use for understanding the thought of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Perhaps Hermetism's influence on Ficino was more productive in another sense, that is, in his role, due to his reputation as a teacher and scholar, as an authoritative intermediary for the diffusion of Mercury's doctrine in the European Renaissance.⁷⁸ But in any case, Trismegistus's teaching was also essential for Ficino, despite his being a famous Platonist, for it was the teaching passed down from the first master (or one of the first masters) of *pia philosophia*.⁷⁹

Examples from Ficino's Translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*

I would now like to venture a few observations about Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (limited to the *Poimandres*),⁸⁰ which will also serve to demonstrate the insufficiency — on the philological level — of Nock and Festugière's edition (although its notes are excellent). In fact, their edition often neglects the contributions of both Ficino and Patrizi, the latter of whom, more than a century after the editio princeps, made his own corrections to the text on the basis of Ficino's translation. A textual history of the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the sixteenth century is sorely needed.

A precise comparison between the Greek text and Ficino's translation reveals even the most minute divergences. Let us turn our attention first to the alterations resulting from Ficino's interpretation of Hermetic thought in the light of Christian doctrine, and thereafter to various corrections he made to the text.

CH I. 2: 'Sum, inquit ille, Pimander, mens divinae potentiae' (lines 14–15). *Mens divinae potentiae* translates the expression *authentias nous*; thus, later (*CH* I. 30), *divinae potentiae verbo* corresponds to *authentias logou* (line 256). The term *authentia* signifies the absolute power of any divinity, for example, that of the Gnostic god spoken of by Hippolytus, as noted by H. Ch. Puech in Nock-Festugière, *ad locum*. For Ficino there can be no other gods than God.

⁷⁸ Some (limited) information on this point is found in J.-P. Mahé, 'La Renaissance et le mirage égyptien', in *From Poimandres to Jacob Böhme: Gnosis, Hermetism and the Christian Tradition*, ed. by R. van den Broek and C. van Heertum (Amsterdam: Pelikaan, 2000), pp. 369–84, but the most important part of the research remains to be done.

⁷⁹ Gentile, however ('Ficino ed Ermete', pp. 29–30), finds that Hermetism continued to be essential for Ficino until the end of his life, to the point that its doctrine became an important part of his own speculation.

⁸⁰ I quote from the edition by Maurizio Campanelli (Turin: [n.pub.], 2011).

CHI. 5. Poimandres reveals to Hermes the true nature of the cosmos. In it is found air, which, being light, followed behind the spirit of fire. Ficino translates this with *aer spiritui parens* (lines 30–31), altering the meaning of Greek *akoloutho*: that is, air ‘obeyed’ the *spiritus*, and this spirit had to be that of God, who ordered all things. Thus Ficino’s translation follows the biblical doctrine of the spirit that ‘moves above the waters’ (Genesis 1. 2).

CHI. 12. Nous, which is the father of everything, is life and light. It made the first human being ‘the same as itself’, but Ficino muffles the concept and renders it ‘hominem sibi similem procreavit’ (lines 79–80), according to the Christian doctrine that God created man not *the same* as himself, but *in his image and likeness* (cf. Genesis 2. 7). The text proceeds: ‘Atque ei tamquam filio suo congratulatus est’. The weaker *congratulatus est* renders the Greek ‘loved’, that is, the love with which the divine mind loved the first man, whom it had created the same as itself, as has just been said. Cf. *Asclepius* 8: *amavit eum*. The same procedure is also used a little later (chap. 13), where ‘they loved him’ is translated ‘humanae mentis meditatione gaudentes’.

CHI. 18 is translated without any special alterations, probably because the Hermetic text already appeared so similar to Christianity. God speaks to his creations with a holy word: ‘Pululate, adolescite, propagate universa germina atque opera mea’ (lines 147–48). The exhortation to each one to recognize ‘the love that is responsible for his death’ is rendered ‘amorem corporis mortis causam esse scite’.

CHI. 19. The Greek text (‘man loved his body, made from the error of love’), is rendered as an instrumental or causal: ‘qui vero corpus amoris errore complectebatur’ (line 156). Therefore, the Greek text continues, he wandered in the darkness, which Ficino explains with ‘is oberrabat in tenebris mortis’, which is a biblical echo.

CHI. 21. ‘Qui se ipsum cognoscit transit in deum’ (line 168) Ficino doesn’t follow the manuscript Laurentianus, which reads ‘advances towards himself’, but corrects into ‘advances towards him’, that is, towards God. Unfortunately Festugière is far from being clear: he translates: ‘celui qui s’est connu soi-même va vers soi’ and at note 52 admits the translation ‘vers Dieu’).

CHI. 26. The Gnostic and Hermetic concept of the ‘ogdoad’, that is, perfection, could not have been known to Ficino, who thus translates the Greek ‘advances towards the nature of the ogdoad’ with what is either a conjecture or an imprecise, generic translation: ‘ad octavam naturam revertitur’ (line 217). The translation ‘deo fruuntur’ (10^v) is closer to Christian spirituality than the Greek ‘they are found in god’.

Regarding the literary aspects of the translation, we note CHI. 5: ‘Ut terrae facies nusquam pateret’ (line 33). *Terrae facies* is Ficino’s addition to the Greek text, which has only: ‘si bien qu’on ne percevait pas’ (translation Festugière, without the object: *terrae facies*); this anticipates the addition of Reitzenstein and Festugière (‘la terre’).

CH I. 9. 'Mens autem deus, utriusque sexus fecunditate plenissimus' (lines 56–57) renders the Greek *arrhenothelys*, but not by means of a translation proper. Instead Ficino uses a famous phrase of the *Asclepius* (chap. 20), which he had known before 1463. Similarly, *arrhenothelys* is later (line 116) translated 'utriusque generis munitus'.

CH I. 11: 'Aer volatilia protulit, aqua vero natantia' (line 73). *Natantia* is Ficino's correction of the Greek manuscript he used for the translation (Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, plut. 71. 33), which reads *noeta* ('intelligible', which is meaningless), whereas the other manuscripts have (the correct reading) *nekta* (as gathered, at least, from the apparatus criticus to Nock and Festugière's edition). According to the same apparatus criticus, 'earth' is supposedly Patrizi's addition, but Ficino had already inserted *terra*: 'terra postmodum animantia' (line 75).

CH I. 13. Ficino conjecturally translates the difficult Greek text 'observed his brother's creations' as 'opificia septem gubernatorum animadvertit' (line 87), understanding 'creations' as the rulers of the seven celestial spheres (but Festugière: 'il perçut les oeuvres de son frère').

CH I. 15. The Greek text is extremely difficult: man, 'being above harmony, became a slave pervaded by harmony', according to the 1471 edition. Apart from the meaning, for which not even Festugière manages to find an adequate solution, Ficino renders it inexactly and with alterations: 'Non [thus he reads *ou* for *oun*] igitur harmonia superior obstitit [instead of *extitit*, as would be correct for the Greek *on*], in harmoniam vero lapsus periclitatus servus effectus est.' But Campanelli's edition rightly has: 'homo igitur harmonia superior extitit' (line 114). Similar additions are found soon thereafter: 'being *arrhenothelys*' in the 1471 edition is complemented with a clarification that is not found in the Greek: 'ab eo qui arborum et rivorum fons est', perhaps simply to give the passage a sense of completion. But Campanelli's edition, rightly again, has 'ab eo qui amborum sexuum fons est' (lines 116–17).

CH I. 19. The Greek '*periousion* good' is rendered '*bonum quod est* super essentiam' (line 155), with a correction that thus anticipates that of Scott (*hyperousion*); Festugière, however, does not accept it in his text, probably wrongly.

CH I. 21. The reading 'you speak well' is a correction of Reitzenstein, accepted by Festugière, for the 'I speak well' of the manuscripts, but Ficino had already translated 'recte loqueris' (line 170).

CH I. 22. Ficino anticipates the correction 'they despise', attributed to Turnebus, reading *fastidiunt* (line 184), instead of the 'despising' of the manuscripts.

CH I. 23. *Throskei auton*, whose sense cannot be understood, was corrected by Reitzenstein to *throskei eis auton*, and Festugière gives *titroskei* ('le perce'); but Ficino had already translated it as 'sensus affligit' (lines 192–93).

CH I. 25. The manuscript used by Ficino, like most others, has the erroneous reading *tas aphormas* [...] *anenergeton*, but Ficino, in agreement with the correction of Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS grec 1220 (which he did not know, however) (*anenerghetous*) reads: 'occasiones [...] iterum ociosas' (line 215). So does Festugière ('desormais sans effet').

CH I. 26. Ficino's translation 'cum iis qui illic sunt' (line 218) anticipates Scott's conjecture.

CH I. 31. Ficino corrects the Laurentian manuscript's mistaken 'the image said', translating correctly 'imago est' (line 262).

In the final prayer (CH I. 31), the Greek says: 'holy is god, who wants to be known, and is known by those who belong to him.' Ficino reads, perhaps with an intentional omission: 'sanctus deus qui suis familiaribus innotescit' (11^v).

Ficino also commits errors due to the poor condition of the text of Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, MS 71. 33. One is (CH I. 28): 'vos qui laboratis *inopia*' (line 237); the other manuscripts read: 'oi synodeusantes *tei planei*', that is, 'by mistake' ('vous qui avez fait route avec l'erreur', Nock-Festugière) but the Laurentian manuscript has *spaneî*, that is, 'lack', or *inopia*. Another is (CH I. 29): 'quo factum est ut illi ex imbrium procellis emerterint'⁸¹ (lines 245–46; 'kai etraphesan ek tou ambrosiou hydatos'; 'et ils furent nourris de l'eau de l'ambroise', Nock-Festugière), but the first hand of the Laurentian manuscript has *abrosiou*, which Ficino understands as derived from *habròs*, 'humid'.

As far as the translation's style is concerned, it appears to be considerably free, even where aesthetic considerations do not justify such a mode of *vertere*. For example, the changes in speaking parts between Pimander and Hermes often do not correspond, in Ficino's translation, to those of modern editions, even though both are based on the same Laurentian manuscript. Furthermore, certain sentences are portrayed as questions by Ficino, whereas they are not such in the Greek text. Others still are paraphrased rather than translated, or, due to the lack of clear punctuation in the Greek manuscript, the *ordo verborum* understood by Ficino is different. In sum, Ficino undertook a pioneering effort on an extremely difficult text. If he was often less than successful in this undertaking; if he made recourse to expedients, such as paraphrases and conjectures, suggested to him by his own personal interpretation of the text; indeed, if he sometimes even made mistakes — at other times he ingeniously corrected a text which made no sense. Interesting are certain

⁸¹ Ficino thus thinks that *etraphesan* is a form of *trepo*, not *trephe*.

dogmatic corrections, suggested to him by his Christian faith and by his conviction that the text in many respects portended Christianity. It was logical for him, then, to understand that portent in the light of what was fully taught later with the coming of Christ on earth.⁸²

Ludovico Lazzarelli

One of the greatest Hermetists of the fifteenth century, not only for the enthusiasm with which he took up the doctrines of the ancient Egyptian sage, but also for his personal and original elaboration of them, was Ludovico Lazzarelli. Born in Septempeđa, modern San Severino Marche, in 1447, he was a man of letters and a Hermetist. Among his various works, we shall take into consideration only those related to our subject, namely the *Fasti Christianae religionis* and the *Crater Hermetis*.

The *Fasti Christianae religionis*

The *Fasti Christianae religionis* is a mature work of Lazzarelli⁸³ and is of great importance for anyone interested in the intellectual development of its author, who was first a profane poet, then a Christian poet, and finally a follower of Hermetism.⁸⁴

⁸² On the Renaissance conception of translation, see, among many others, E. Berti, 'Traduzioni oratorie fedeli', *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, 2 (1988), 245–66; Berti, 'Osservazioni filologiche alla versione del *Filebo* di Marsilio Ficino', in *Il 'Filebo' di Platone e la sua fortuna: Atti del Convegno di Napoli 4–6 novembre 1993*, ed. by P. Cosenza (Napoli: D'Auria, 1996), pp. 93–172 (p. 112): in the second draft of his translation of the *Philebus*, 'Ficino's interpretation of the dialogue remained unchanged [...]. The young Marsilio, after not many years of studying Greek, had already reached an extremely deep level of penetration of Platonic thought and developed an extraordinary ability to orient himself in a linguistic context of rare difficulty [...]. In many passages of the first draft, the fabric of the literal translation effectively shows through. And we know that for his own personal use Marsilio Ficino was in the habit of translating "verbatim". The technique of literary translation was the current practice in schools, and a millennial tradition of high culture had given it credibility particularly for works of philosophy and religion.' Such a positive judgement is not yet applicable to Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

⁸³ According to the biography of Lazzarelli written by his brother Filippo, the *Fasti* was begun in 1476–77 in Pioraco, the summer residence of the Varano family, by whom Ludovico was employed as a tutor. Its composition was drawn out over many years. It was completed in Sixtus IV's Rome, and later revised and dedicated to King Charles VIII of France.

⁸⁴ Some observations in M. P. Saci, *Ludovico Lazzarelli da Elicona a Sion* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1999), pp. 61–63; Saci, 'Ludovico Lazzarelli, un Ovidio cristiano', in *Presenze eterodosse nel*

The work is also important for its rich historical and biographical information, and it is useful for the description it gives of the poet-philosopher's milieu through its references to contemporary events and individuals. Lazzarelli tells of a youthful stay in Padova, which he exalts as a new Athens, a city where theologians teach the awesome mysteries of God (VII. 401–10), and he mentions one of his earlier poetic works, the *Bombyx* (V. 767–68).⁸⁵

Christian Poetry

The *Fasti* was composed for the most part under Pope Sixtus IV, but it is dedicated to Charles VIII, king of France, and thus the dedication was written at the end of the fifteenth century. There the work is entitled, with a somewhat improper Greekism, *Dikeodia*, that is, 'song of justice'. Thus it does not bear the more common title of *Fasti*, an alteration probably suggested to the poet by the intense religious inspiration of his final years.

Indeed, in the first draft the name *Dikeodia* does not indicate the work but a tenth Muse, that is, the Christian Muse. She is presented in II. 145–52:

The nymph Eusebie bears me to the Thunderer of Galilee,
I am a sacred nymph born on Mount Zion;
Dikeodia is the name that my very nature gives me [...] among the Castalides I claim the tenth glory for myself and I delight Empyrean choruses with true praise.
Egeria's husband⁸⁶ was able to admit her to the Muses, so why could the Father himself not introduce me as the highest?⁸⁷

The nymph Dikeodia is born on Mount Zion to Eusebie, that is, Christian *pietas*, and the 'Thunderer of Galilee', that is, Christ. She is, then, the Muse of Christian poetry, the greatest of all. She has converted the other Muses to their new duty (II. 155–56), and some of them are even inspiring the poet with his

Viterbese tra Quattro e Cinquecento: Atti del Convegno Internazionale (Viterbo, 2–3 Dicembre 1996), ed. by V. De Caprio and C. Ranieri (Rome: Archivio Guido Izzì, 2000), pp. 27–62.

⁸⁵ According to Saci (*Ludovico Lazzarelli*, pp. 55–57), the *Bombyx* was written around 1467. Its dating to after 1479, maintained by some, seems, then, to be definitively refuted by what is said in the *Fasti*. I quote the *Fasti* from the following edition: Lodovico Lazzarelli, *Fasti Christianae religionis*, ed. by M. Bertolini (Naples: D'Auria 1991).

⁸⁶ I.e. Numa Pompilius, the husband of the nymph Egeria.

⁸⁷ 'me parit Eusebie Galilaeo nympha Tonanti, | orta Sioneo sum sacra nympha iugo | Dikeodia mihi nomen re contigit ipsa [...] | inter Castalides decimam mihi vendico laudem, | Empyrios vera mulceo laude choros. | Egeriam potuit Misis asciscere coniunx, | cur me supremam non queat ipse pater?'

religious theme. As such, Dikeodia is the tenth Muse, with authority over all the others (II. 900–04). This is also repeated in IX. 1155–56: ‘You give speech to my tongue, and since the Aonian sisters | have retired, yours are the strings and plectra of the lyre.’⁸⁸

Thus Christ may receive the poet at the spring of Marah, which has been made potable (II. 977–80)!⁸⁹ If Lazzarelli still invokes the Muses (II. 985–86), he nevertheless clarifies that Parnassus and Helicon have been substituted by Mount Tabor (II. 987–88). The poet bids farewell to his earlier compositions (i.e. the *Prometheus* and *Patavinum hastiludium*) and is now guided by Dikeodia (II. 989–90).

But sometimes Dikeodia seems to be the Virgin Mary: ‘Dear poet, devoted to the *sacred rites of my son*, whose work is more pleasing than others’ (II. 273–74).⁹⁰ The Muse recalls the profound pain she suffers on account of the death of her only son (who must be Christ):

I am the one in whose breast faith is firm.
It was always firm and never frightened by any disturbance,
although a deep pain for the death of my son gnaws at me.⁹¹ (II. 280–82)

If the true Muse is Mary, then it is just for the poet to emphasize the lies of pagan myths (II. 1117–24, III. 41–42, III. 481–82). The theme that awes the poet is the birth of Christ, which certainly must not be compared with those of mythological poetry, such as the creation of Jupiter, or the labours of Leto or Semele. The Virgin Mary is the bride, mother, and daughter of God; she is much greater than Cybele, who was the mother of the gods (IX. 1089–92). None of the pagan goddesses, who were thought to bestow gifts and favours upon men, possesses the power of the Virgin (IX. 1091–96).

⁸⁸ ‘tu das eloquium linguae, cessere sorores | Aoniae, tua sunt stamina, plectra lyrae’.

⁸⁹ The symbolism of Exodus 15. 22–25 (where it is said that God makes the water of the spring of Marah potable, so that the Hebrews fleeing Egypt can drink in the desert) had been well known ever since Jerome’s times. It indicates the transformation of pagan art into Christian art, such that poetry loses its purely recreational, inane aspects and becomes truthful and a catalyst for moral improvement.

⁹⁰ ‘Care *mei nati* vates operose *sacrorum*, gratius est praeter cetera cuius opus.’

⁹¹ ‘illa ego sum, cuius pectore firma fides. | Firma fuit semper nulloque exterrita motu, | *morte licet nati* me dolor altus edat.’ In imitation of classical poetry, in which the Muse is often called *dea*, Mary is thus also invoked as *Dea* in II. 360. She is called *entheia Virgo* (I. 44), and, differently from Juno, ‘tu soror et coniunx, *genetrix tu vera Tonantis*, | consortem regni te facit ergo sui’ (I. 49–50; ‘you are the sister and wife, *you are the true mother of the Thunderer*, | and thus he makes you the consort of his kingdom’).

Assisted by this new poetic, holy, and divine 'Muse', the poet devotes himself to presenting a new form of poetry, one which ought to be both sacred and truthful. This is the very issue that occupied so many Christian men of letters in the Renaissance; it is probably in reference to the cultural situation of his own times that Lazzarelli exhorts the poets to abandon the false theme given them by the *antiquae nymphae*. Instead of the ancient goddesses, one should now sing of the Virgin (IV. 975–82). Indeed, the theme that forms the subject of his song is not false or fantastic, like that of the pagan myths, but true (IV. 27–60).

Consequently, the reader should pay attention not so much to the variety and the refinement of the words, but to the truth of the things narrated (IV. 67–134). (This is a topos of Christian literature in general, which prefers truth, even without rhetorical ornament, to invention.)

Naturally, Lazzarelli's declaration of being a Christian poet requires (and this exigency is also a topos) that he give an adequate defence of his identity, especially in an age, like his, in which poetry was conceived as an *imitatio* of the ancients. Such a defence is presented in the preface to Charles VIII (p. 41, lines 25–29):

I am far from the opinion of those who, professing themselves Christians, are so crazy as to pursue imitation rather than art, and thus lapse back into pagan things and consider it something monstrous to hold an oration or write a poem about Christ [...]; I will admit that, insofar as they tell about true things, our books exercise less poetic license, and thus they display less gaiety and eloquence — but for that they are no less learned, wise, or beneficial.⁹² (p. 42, lines 44–48)

And yet, as is to be expected, Lazzarelli, even though a Christian poet, has exercised a certain amount of poetic license in the Greek manner (*praefatio*, p. 43, lines 93–96). And as a matter of fact poetic refinements are to be found in his work: Christ is generally called 'Thunderer' (see I. 49), and God is also *regnator Olympi* (IV. 839); Mary is *Solymae dea* (I. 8, VIII. 848, VIII. 1050, XV. 18), *Dea* (II. 360), and *maxima Dea* (XIII. 650). She is much more important than the *graecula Sappho* and the Sibyls (XV. 47: in this context the Virgin Mary is responding to a letter sent to her by Ignatius of Antioch).⁹³ The devil is called 'Pluto' (IV. 135), and the sky is *empyreus Olympus* (VIII. 107).

⁹² 'Longueque ab illorum opinione discessi, qui adeo insaniunt ut sub Christiana professione magis imitatione quam arte poesim sectantes, ad gentilia relabantur, de Christo autem vel orationem habere vel carmen edere monstro simillimum ducant [...]; fateor equidem, sicut in his nostris libris pro narrando rei veritate minus est licentiae, sic minus et festivitatis et eloquentiae esse, at non minus doctrinae, non minus sapientiae, non minus erit emolumenti.'

⁹³ To whom, however, as was common in the culture of his age, Lazzarelli attributes a prophetic function of a certain importance.

The Muses, for their part, are not excluded from the poem, but they are placed under one who is greater than them: Dikeodia. For example, there is Thalia, whom Lazzarelli addresses in the work's dedication. In v. 441–42, the poet appears surrounded by Apollo and the nine Muses, of whom the one with the sweetest voice is Calliope (v. 443–44). Thalia tells the poet about the consecration of the Basilica of the Saviour, a work of Pope Silvester (XII. 280–314). Since the Muses are now Christian, it is clear that they must sing the truth, and not the fictions and lies of the pagans (I. 1–4; see the verses inserted on p. 85).

Thus all the nine Muses are listed in II. 877–90. In the past, the poet had relied on their help to sing the *simulacra deum*,⁹⁴ but now he is devoted to illustrating *res sacrae* (II. 875). It is therefore totally legitimate to invoke the muses to sing the praises of Christ. Consequently, they are 'famulae Christi [...] in praeconia natae', if one does not want to call them (as the pagans had) *deae* (II. 893–94). Terpsichore herself, who is speaking in this passage (she is also mentioned in II. 1025), had inspired the song of Moses when the Egyptians were swallowed up by the Red Sea (II. 895–96), as well as that of David and the 'magnificat' of the Virgin (II. 897–98). She has now been sent to the poet by Dikeodia (II. 903–06).

Polyhymnia also inspires the poet (III. 469–70). Lazarelli (as she says) need not think he frightens the Muses with his singing of sacred themes, nor need he worry about committing sacrilege if he accepts their inspiration and their gifts (III. 471–78). Polyhymnia is also invoked in v. 721–22, where the story of Pope Pelagius (the predecessor of Gregory the Great) and his halting of the plague in Rome is narrated.⁹⁵ The poet invokes the Muses in VI. 467–68, and Polyhymnia appears, rebuking him for having hesitated to turn to them: a poetic work cannot be written without their help, and Moses himself had their aid when writing Genesis (VI. 475–76). Thus there were other Christian poets as well, such as Arator and Juvenius (VI. 477–80). But the Muses are now sacred, and they sing the Christian rites with a more worthy song (VI. 481–82).⁹⁶ Consequently, Polyhymnia appears in X. 181–82; the *caelestis Urania* is invoked and appears in XIV. 835–36.

In the final version of the poem, however, instead of invoking the Muses Lazzarelli begins with an invocation to Jesus (I. 16–42), to the Virgin Mary (I. 43–56), and lastly to Charles VIII (I. 57–98). Thus an evolution can be noticed, in the

⁹⁴ Perhaps the poet is alluding to another work of his, the *De gentiliū deorum imaginibus*.

⁹⁵ Polyhymnia appears again in VIII. 63–64 and in XV. 543–46.

⁹⁶ Elsewhere, the poet says that he would have preferred to avoid invoking the Muses, but Clío presents herself in IV. 251–60 and in IX. 41–44.

sense that the Muses are now utterly abandoned, and their place is taken fully by the concept of Christian inspiration. The poet renders thanks to God, since the work on which he has ventured is absolutely new:

Great thanks to God, for I am not without his gift:
behold, I am a guest of the water of the Castalian font.
However great is the power of my poem, God, in you
it is spun; behold, I sing of your altars, I sing of your sacred rites.⁹⁷ (v. 27–30)

Prophetism and Symbolism

The entirety of book XVI is devoted to evoking the Last Judgement. The poet describes the coming of the Antichrist and the resurrection of the dead to the sound of trumpets (vv. 173–200). On that terrible day there will be no distinction between rich and poor, between humble and mighty (vv. 201–16). The Christian emperors, both good and evil, will rise for the Last Judgement, and they are listed in great number. Altogether, an impressive picture is conjured up in this apocalypse.

The poet himself will be among the risen, and he appeals to the favour and the benignity of those saints of whom he sang (vv. 483–88), especially the Virgin Mary (vv. 489–94). Lazzarelli has devoted himself to poetry (v. 495: *lusimus*), but not out of a desire for vain reputation, rather only to please Christ (vv. 495–96). He has sung true things, not fabrications. Therefore, although earlier poets were greater than he, his work is still superior to theirs, just as the truth is superior to falsity (vv. 497–502). May posterity know: he could have been a better artist, but if he had sought art for its own sake, the *gratia veri* would have been overwhelmed by the ornaments of the Muses (vv. 503–04).

After the coming of the Antichrist and his cruel tyranny, there will be the kingdom of Christ and final peace: ‘It is not far off, unless the stars in the sky and the oracles are mistaken; | there shall be one fold, and one shepherd’ (XVI. 83–84).⁹⁸ This prophecy of the final coming of Christ is taken from John 10. 16; it is particularly dear to Lazzarelli and to his messianic vision, and it is presented two other times in the poem:

Behold, the time is nigh when the whole flock of the world,
led by one shepherd, will graze on pious fields.⁹⁹ (II. 839–40)

⁹⁷ ‘Gratia magna Deo, neque enim sum muneris expers: | en ego Castaliae sum rudis hospes aquae. | Quantulacumque, Deus, vis est mihi carminis, in te | vertitur, en aras, en tua sacra cano.’

⁹⁸ ‘Non procul id, ni signa poli, ni oracula fallant, | fiet ovile unum, pastor et unus erit.’

⁹⁹ ‘En prope tempus adest, quo mundi totus in uno | grex pastore pios tondeat actus agros.’

and the kingdoms that are moved one against another will never find rest
until there is one fold and one shepherd.¹⁰⁰ (VII. 1195–96)

This is a prelude to Lazarelli's use of the verse in his next work, the *Crater Hermetis* 29. 7–8:

More than any others, as we said, Jesus Christ revealed this mystery. But the moment is near when, time having reached a kind of completion, he will manifest it more clearly, such that what he himself said will come to pass: 'And I have other sheep who are not of this flock, whom I must bring into it. And then the flock will be one, and the shepherd one.'¹⁰¹

Christianity and Hermetism

In line with the cultural climate of his age, in which the Sibyls were well known, the poet makes recourse to their prophecies announcing the new, true God: "Know your God," said the Sibyl; | he is the Son of God' (*Fasti* II. 665–66).¹⁰² The Sibyls and many pagan wise men foretold Christ (II. 1083–84; XIII. 666–67, 869–72). Pallas, born from the head of Jupiter, might be a symbol of Christ's birth (VII. 11–12). This allegory is ancient. It probably dates back to Antiochus of Ascalon, who gave a strong impulse to the first-century BC renewal of Platonism, and for Middle Platonists it signified that the world of the ideas was present in god himself. Lazarelli takes it up here within the parameters of Christian Platonism, making Pallas, the goddess of wisdom, stand for Christ, hypostatic and absolute Wisdom (cf. I Cor. 1. 24).

The poet also proposes the ancient identification (which he was able to find in the *De ave Phoenix* — a work that is perhaps by Lactantius, perhaps only attributed to him) between Christ and the phoenix:

And like that one bird who, dying amidst diverse odors,
is renewed by death and takes on greater powers,
thus Christ was reborn mightier than before,
and his renewed limbs outshine the radiance of the sun.¹⁰³ (II. 1043–46)

¹⁰⁰ 'motaque non umquam contraria regna quiescent | donec ovile unum pastor et unus erit'.

¹⁰¹ I quote from my edition: Lodovico Lazarelli, *Opere Ermetiche*, ed. by M. P. Saci, C. Morechini, and F. Troncarelli, Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Ludovico Lazarelli, I (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra Editore, 2009): 'Prae ceteris igitur, ut diximus, Christus Iesus hoc arcanum revelavit. Sed prope est ut quadam temporis plenitudine apertius manifestet, ut impleatur quod ipse dixit: "Et habeo alias oves, quae non sunt ex hoc ovili, quas oportet me adducere. Et tunc fiet unum ovile et unus pastor."'

¹⁰² 'Auton son ginoske theon tibi voce Sibylla, | nosce Deum, dixit, filius ille Dei est.'

¹⁰³ 'Utque inter varios moriens avis unica odores, | maiores vires morte novata capit, | sic maiore iterum Christus virtute revixit, | Phoebeum superant membra novata iubar.'

Also interesting is the attempt to 'historicize' a certain detail from Genesis (one which, to tell the truth, is not actually found there), namely that Lot knew the movements of the stars; this knowledge is ascribed to possible instruction at the hands of Zoroaster (III. 699–700). As was said above, Ficino had considered Zoroaster to be one of the ancient wise men who were the sources of *prisca philosophia*. Zoroaster's science, however, was not wholly proper, astrology always having aroused the suspicion of the Church. This is shown by the fact that Lazzarelli attributes this science to Lot, who is a secondary figure in the Old Testament and lived, by his own choice, among the pagans of Sodom.

Section XIII. 337–457 is devoted to celebrating the feast of Pope Damasus. After several introductory verses, Lazzarelli addresses his fellow poets (*gens o divina, poetae*), exhorting them to channel the waters of the Castalian spring to Christ, that is, to devote themselves to Christian poetry (XIII. 371–72). May their sleepy minds be roused, and may they seek the Word and abandon their darkness; may the poets embrace the divine Word of the Father. And Lazzarelli adds: 'There exists the Logos and the Word, the mind and the wisdom of Jesus, | who in the mind of Hermes of old was Pimander' (vv. 377–78).¹⁰⁴ This same conception, that of the equivalence of Pimander and Christ, opens the *Crater Hermetis*.

The poet continues: happy are we who live in the latter days, if our wakened soul is able to contain such great goods. This notion of living in the latter days is also diffused, although not so explicit, in the *Crater Hermetis*. The Word, which remained hidden from the ancients, appears in human form in order to allow us to become gods (vv. 381–82). Following the lead of Christ, we shall restore the world, for God made sure we would be at his temple (vv. 385–86). Here we can see the yearning for palingenesis that was so widespread in the final decades of the fifteenth century in Italy. Lazzarelli presents it by way of an apocalyptic vision portrayed in the final book of the work. Christ, the poet continues, allowed the great men of the past (Moses, Joshua, Peter) to perform their miracles:

He is mind, life, the way,¹⁰⁵ he is an overflowing spring from which
whoever drinks will thirst no more.¹⁰⁶
Hermes, abandoning his kingdom, sought to know him;¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ 'Est Logos et Verbum, mens et sapientia Iesus, | qui prius Hermetis mente Pimander erat.'

¹⁰⁵ Cf. John 14. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. John 4. 14.

¹⁰⁷ The allusion is not clear. Perhaps Lazzarelli means that Hermes, king of the Egyptians, no longer wanted to follow the religion of his kingdom and instead chose to become a disciple of Moses.

he knew him, and therefore he is renowned in our times.
 We have wretchedly refused to grasp what is manifest, but
 he sought to store the hidden Logos in his mind.
 Thus he was able to predict hidden causes,
 and thenceforth he was known as 'Thrice-great'.¹⁰⁸ (vv. 391–98)

Fasti XIII. 1175–1230 sings of the feast of the Innocents, and it recounts the flight into Egypt and the visit of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to Hermopolis. The city, which was already fortunate for having been founded by Hermes, is now doubly so, since it gave hospitality to Jesus. This rather curious detail about Jesus's life, that is, his stay in the city of Hermes, seems to be an invention of Lazzarelli, and it has an emblematic function: to connect Hermetism yet again with Christian truth. Hermopolis was a pagan city that worshipped the cynocephalus; it had been founded by Hermes (see *Ascl.* 27), who brought forth from his divine breast a great teaching full of wisdom (XIII. 1219).

In XIV. 11–128, Lazzarelli tells of the feast of the Lord's circumcision. The essence of God cannot be expressed (vv. 23–24), he says. Indeed, God has been given various names, which the poet now goes on to list after beseeching Christ not to reject what has been inspired in him by the Muses (vv. 33–70). Thereupon follows a lengthy enumeration of the various names attributed to God both by pagan poets and philosophers and by Christianity. It begins with the Hebrew tetragram that God had entrusted to the Jews and that was later diffused among the Greeks. God possesses every name, because God alone is everything, and all nature is his image (vv. 39–40; cf. *Ascl.* 20).¹⁰⁹ The Hermetic passage continues: God is *pantonymos*, because he makes himself and creates all things (vv. 41–42), but Hermes also defines him as *anonymos* (vv. 43–44). Thereupon follow designations taken from Orphism and the attributes *apator* and *amator* (vv. 57–58), taken from Lactantius (*Div. instit.* I. 7. 1–2) (pp. 36–38). God is also *ousiarches*, because everything that exists derives from him (vv. 59–60). This designation is taken from the *Asclepius* (chap. 19), although there it had a notably different, strictly astrological use; God is *pantomorphos* (vv. 63–64), because he diffuses his form in all the forms.

¹⁰⁸ 'Hic mens, vita via est, hic fons uberrimus, ex quo | non sitit ulterius quisquis adhaurit aquas.
 | Hunc Hermes voluit neglecto noscere regno; | novit, ad haec igitur tempora nomen habet. | Nos
 fugimus miseri manifestum apprehendere, at ille | occultum voluit condere mente Logon. | Hinc
 rerum occultas potuit praedicere causas, | nomine ter dictus Maximus inde fuit.'

¹⁰⁹ 'Omne tenes nomen, cum sis Deus omnia solus | et natura omnis cum sit imago tua' ('you have every name, because you, God, are the only one and everything | and all nature is your image').

Another detail is worthy of note: Lazzarelli's treatment of the myth of Pandora. He interprets it in the *Fasti*, but when he takes it up again later in the *Crater Hermetis* he explains it differently. Earlier still, in the *Prometheus*, Lazzarelli claims that the human created by Prometheus was called 'Pandora' because it had all its gifts, that is, all its qualities, as a gift from the gods, and more precisely because mankind would necessarily be saddled with worries as a consequence of these gifts. Indeed, the etymology would be *pan* = everything and *doris* = saltwater, because man is full of the saltiness (i.e. bitterness) of things (*Prometheus* 200–03).¹¹⁰ In the *Fasti* (IV. 915–16), however, Lazzarelli draws on Hesiod's account (*Opera et dies* 42–99) to propose a different, Christian explanation: it was not the vase opened by Pandora that spread evil among men, but the sin of Eve, who had believed the serpent. In the *Crater Hermetis*, finally, Lazzarelli abandons the Christian interpretation and accepts that of Giovanni Pontano, who claims that Pandora means 'gift of all things', that is, the knowledge of material and sensible things, which, opening the vase of our mind, causes all its goods to fly away. Only Elpis, that is, hope, remained in the mind (*Crater* 12. 3). As a justification for his earlier interpretation, Lazzarelli explains that he was not asserting it himself but was only describing Hesiod's story.

Finally, in this poem Lazzarelli also presents the doctrine, common in Hermetism and in all late antique philosophy, of man's *status rectus* (*Fasti* I. 353–54, III. 3–4).

The *Fasti Christianae religionis*, then, is one of the most significant of Ludovico Lazzarelli's works, the meeting point for literary, religious, and philosophical interests. Elements of Hebraic and Hermetic doctrines, which had already been touched upon previously by this rather atypical humanist, now appear strengthened, and they herald the importance that they will take on in the later *Crater Hermetis*.

The *Crater Hermetis*

Lazzarelli's central work, and the one which best demonstrates his Christian Hermetism, is the *Crater Hermetis*. P. O. Kristeller made a fundamental contribution to its study and also identified its principal manuscript and printed witnesses.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ The text of the *Prometheus* can be found in Moreschini, *Storia dell'ermetismo cristiano*.

¹¹¹ P. O. Kristeller, 'Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli: Contributo alla diffusione delle idee ermetiche nel Rinascimento', *Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa*, 2 (1938), 237–62, repr. in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1969), pp. 221–48 (pp. 236–40). Also important, for its useful notes and introduction, is the anthology

The principal manuscript is XIII AA 34 of the Biblioteca Nazionale in Naples, a parchment codex of the fifteenth century, which might be the dedication copy intended for Ferdinand of Aragon. The editio princeps (S) was prepared by Lefèvre d'Étaples for the press of Henricus Stephanus in 1505. In the Naples manuscript the *Crater Hermetis* is dedicated to Ferdinand of Aragon, and it consists of a dialogue between Lazzarelli himself and the King. It takes place in the sovereign's old age (chap. 1.3), after the latter had entrusted the government of the state to his firstborn, Alfonso II, and thus probably after 1492¹¹² — but before 25 January 1494, which is the date of Ferdinand II of Aragon's death. The characters in the *Crater* are Lazzarelli, the King, and Giovanni Pontano. Naturally, the King and Pontano have minor roles, and their participation is limited to a few exchanges, the main part being reserved for the teacher, that is, to Lazzarelli himself. The King assumes the role of the enthusiastic and convinced student, whereas Pontano, who, like the King, assents to Lazzarelli's Hermetic teaching, is (as he was in real life) the man of letters endowed with a smattering of philosophy (indeed, he had written the astrological poem *Urania*). Therefore he is not limited to limply rehearsing poetic formulas but is motivated by a desire to know the truth. He is the combination of literary man and philosopher, a typical figure in the culture of the fifteenth century.

The text of the editio princeps is significantly different from the manuscript version. It should be noted that Lazzarelli himself had begun to change the Naples manuscript (N) by means of erasures, with which he sought to substitute the name of 'Ferd.' with the initial 'R'. According to Sosti 'R' signifies 'Rex' (as it will then appear in Stephanus's edition),¹¹³ but according to Maria Paola Saci it stands for CAR. or CAROLI, that is, Charles VIII, to whom Lazzarelli ultimately dedicated the *Crater* just like the *Fasti*.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, manuscripts posterior to N already contain traces of alterations that will then reappear in S, on which account Sosti thinks that those manuscripts represent an intermediate version between N and S.¹¹⁵

of the *Crater* edited by M. Brini in *Testi Umanistici su l'Ermetismo: Testi di Ludovico Lazzarelli, Francesco Giorgio Veneto, Cornelio Agrippa di Nettesheim*, ed. by E. Garin and others (Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1955), pp. 51–74. This volume was particularly innovative for studies on Hermetism, and it still deserves to be remembered today, when the works of the past are being forgotten.

¹¹² Or, as S. Sosti, 'Il *Crater Hermetis* di Ludovico Lazzarelli', *Quaderni dell'Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento meridionale*, 1 (1984), 99–133 (p. 105), argues, after 1486, which is the year in which Pontano was named first minister by the King of Naples.

¹¹³ Sosti, 'Il *Crater Hermetis*', pp. 127–28.

¹¹⁴ Saci, *Ludovico Lazzarelli*, p. 89.

¹¹⁵ Sosti, 'Il *Crater Hermetis*', pp. 126–27.

To whom, then, ought the second version of the *Crater Hermetis* — the one published by Lefèvre d'Étaples — be attributed? Both Sosti and I have taken the position that it is the work of Lazzarelli himself. Mirella Brini, however, thought that such could not be possible, arguing that S contains an alteration (chap. 13. 3) so daft that it makes the text say something incorrect. The change, which as she notes amounts to 'the removal of the first part of a quotation from Macrobius, [...] causes the second part, now without its explicit reference, to be incorporated automatically into a passage from the Malachim of Moses Maimonides, with an absurd result that the author would have sought to avoid'.¹¹⁶ This hypothesis was also accepted by Saci, as well as by Crahay in a review of my earlier work *Dall'Asclepius' al Crater Hermetis*.¹¹⁷ For his part, Crahay proposes attributing these corrections to the editor of the *Crater*, that is, to Lefèvre d'Étaples. Nevertheless, reconsidering the extent and the importance of the alterations made to the text in the editio princeps, it seems to me that my earlier interpretation was correct and that the second version must be attributed to Lazzarelli himself. Indeed, who could have been motivated to revise the text *in such a radical and thorough way*, so as to make it more consonant with Christianity and less bold? Probably Lazzarelli in his last years, who, according to the description of his brother Filippo, was possessed by a streak of devotion to the Christian faith.¹¹⁸ As to the difficulty raised by Mirella Brini, a closer look at the text shows that the passage of Macrobius was in fact not incorporated into that of Maimonides. For the two are clearly separated from one another by a period in all the witnesses (manuscript and printed) containing the new version, and in such a way as for Macrobius's words to end up being less a quotation of Macrobius himself than a statement of Lazzarelli's own. Consequently the text is perfectly coherent.

In the editio princeps the words of Pontano and those spoken to him by the other two interlocutors — Ferdinand of Aragon and Lazzarelli himself — have been eliminated or thoroughly modified so as to be attributed to Lazzarelli only or to an unspecified 'king' (who is no longer said to be the King of Naples). Thus the dialogue is only between Lazzarelli and the King. Lazzarelli's intention was probably

¹¹⁶ *Testi Umanistici*, ed. by Garin, Brini, Vasoli, and Zambelli, p. 52.

¹¹⁷ Saci, *Ludovico Lazzarelli*, pp. 89–90. R. Crahey's review is in *L'Antiquité Classique*, 56 (1987), 402–03.

¹¹⁸ See *Vita Lodovici Lazzarelli Septempedani Poetae Laureati per Philippum fratrem ejusdem ad Angelum Colotium*, in W. J. Hanegraaff and R. M. Bouthorn's edition (*Lodovico Lazzarelli (1447–1500): The Hermetic Writings and Related Documents* (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), pp. 304–08).

to give the *Crater* a more exclusively 'technical' character, eliminating every aspect not specifically related to philosophy or religion. Vincenzo Fera has pointed out that this change was due to Lazzarelli's awareness that Pontano was essentially unconnected with Hermetism and that in his dialogue *Aegidius* he treats Cariteo, who claimed to be an ardent Hermetist, with irony.¹¹⁹ After a more careful consideration, then, Pontano would no longer have seemed appropriate to Lazzarelli to appear as a speaker in such a programmatically pro-Hermetic text as the *Crater Hermetis*. Furthermore, as Sosti argues, it might also have been useful to make Pontano disappear in the second version for another reason: in chapter 12. 4 he says that Lazzarelli had recently dedicated the *Fasti Christianae religionis* to Ferdinand of Aragon, but the work would later have to be dedicated to Charles VIII, who had conquered the kingdom of Naples.¹²⁰ Ultimately, the alterations indicate that Lazzarelli sought to sever all ties with his Neapolitan phase.

Stephanus's edition constitutes a clear improvement on the earlier version with regard to language and Latin style. What is more, it alters many particulars found in N, making prudent changes to its content and the doctrine it teaches. S (i.e. Lazzarelli in his last years) seems to be guided by a very precise principle: the elimination or modification of all the passages in which a close tie between Christianity and Hermetism had been too explicitly affirmed, as well as of every statement that could be criticized to any extent from the standpoint of Christian dogma. Examples of such alterations in the name of orthodoxy are numerous,¹²¹ beginning with the title, which in N is *Via Christi et Crater Hermetis* and within the work is called *Christi calix et Hermetis crater*; in S, however, the work is only *Crater Hermetis* both in the title and in the text. This is an example of the elimination of every inappropriate mixture of Hermetism and Christianity.

The work is a philosophical dialogue of the Ciceronian kind. It contains some common themes such as the polemic against *literati* and especially against the Greeks, who are said to be solely interested in the artistry of words and not in their

¹¹⁹ Vincenzo Fera in his review of my edition (in *Dall'Asclepius' al Crater Hermetis*), *Bollettino di Studi Latini*, 17 (1987), 168–70.

¹²⁰ Sosti, 'Il *Crater Hermetis*', p. 131.

¹²¹ The interested reader should consult the apparatus criticus in my edition of the *Crater* indicated above (note 101). Some of these alterations, however, were identified earlier by Brini (*Testi Umanistici*, ed. by Garin, Brini, Vasoli, and Zambelli, p. 52) and in greater detail in the work of Sosti, which appeared, by strange coincidence, at the same time as one of my own studies — Moreschini, 'Il *Crater Hermetis* di Ludovico Lazzarelli', *Res Publica Litterarum*, 7 (1984), 161–70 — which then provided the basis for that of 1986.

content. The dialogue is prefaced by an explanatory prologue, in which Lazzarelli receives divine inspiration before beginning his discussion with the King and Pontano.

The *Crater Hermetis*, furthermore, is a *prosimetron*, that is, a composition made up of a succession of prose and verse parts. The parts in verse have a function quite distinct from those in prose, the poems being a series of hymns to God whose aim is to emphasize certain salient points of the discussion. Boethius's *Consolatio* might be the exemplar for this kind of dialogue (although it is not named).¹²² All the hymns are composed in the metres of classical lyric.

The title of *Crater* derives from that of the fourth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, where it is explained thus (chaps 3–4):

TAT: For what reason, then, did god not share mind with all of them, my father?
 HERMES: He wanted it put between souls, my child, as a prize for them to contest. TAT:
 And where did he put it? HERMES: He filled a great mixing bowl (*krater*) with it and sent
 it below, appointing a herald whom he commanded to make the following proclamation
 to human hearts: 'Immerse yourself in the krater if your heart has the strength, if it believes
 you will rise up again to the one who sent the krater below, if it recognizes the purpose of
 your coming to be.' All those who heeded the proclamation and immersed themselves in
 mind participated in gnosis and became perfect people because they received mind. But
 those who missed the point of the proclamation are people of reason because they did not
 receive mind as well and do not know the purpose or the agents of their coming to be.

Hermes' 'krater' is a symbol signifying the doctrine of salvation, sent unto earth by God. Those who were baptized in this krater received mind and achieved gnosis, that is, the knowledge of their true nature, their origin, and their destiny. Those, on the other hand, who did not listen to the redeeming word of God remained *logikoi*. That is, according to a contrast between *nous* and *logos* that is typical of Hermetism, they remained at an inferior stage, that of being men who are rational but still incapable of possessing the mind of God and reaching gnosis.¹²³ Lazzarelli Christianizes this doctrine underlying the meaning of 'Hermes' krater' (let us recall that version N of Lazzarelli's *Crater* spoke precisely of *via Christi et crater Hermetis*), and therefore he can well say: 'Indeed, whatever we shall now discover about

¹²² Unlike Kristeller ('Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli', p. 236), I would not think of the Hermetic treatises as a model, as none of them contain poetic parts.

¹²³ See Festugière, *Hermétisme et mystique païenne*, pp. 100–12. Lazzarelli, however, employs the term *crater* in its more general meaning ('source of wisdom'), as can also be seen by his use of the verb 'to draw on' (*haurio*); the image of the 'bowl' also appears in other texts by Lazzarelli (e.g. in the *Praefatio* to the *Epistola Enoch*, in *Opere Ermetiche*, ed. by Saci, Moerschini, and Troncarelli), p. 84.

true happiness we shall draw from the doctrine of the Gospels and the teachings of Hermes' (chap. 4. 3).¹²⁴

The *Crater Hermetis* is described in N as *de summa hominis dignitate dialogus*. This subtitle, then, directs us towards the theme of the 'dignity of man', which was a common object of study and discussion in the fifteenth century¹²⁵ and was one of the fundamental themes of the *Asclepius*, although it was not handled there with the traditional arguments, say, of a Giannozzo Manetti. Indeed, as we have seen, the *Asclepius* (chap. 6) exalts the dignity of that *magnum miraculum* who is man, created by god to rule and govern the universe, and to know the greatness, the goodness, and the generosity of his creator.

Lazzarelli situates Hermetism in the context of other philosophical doctrines, but he connects it particularly to Christianity in the historical, chronological sense we saw in Ficino. He claims that Hermetic wisdom is a precursor and forerunner of Christian religion. What is more, the two substantially coincide for Lazzarelli, insofar as Moses, who was born in Egypt, supposedly taught Hermetic wisdom to the Jews:¹²⁶ 'ab hoc omnis suam antiqua theologia traxit originem', as will be repeated *ad abundantiam* by Agostino Steuco (pp. 245–46). Thus ancient Hermetic theology derives from Moses, just as Jewish theology does. This is why it is possible to be both Christians and Hermetists, and why the Christian is justified in highly prizing Hermetic writings. It is fitting, then, that before embarking upon an examination of abstruse doctrines, Lazzarelli says a verse prayer to invoke the aid of redeeming and merciful God (chap. 5).

The search for points of agreement between Hermetism and Christianity runs throughout the whole work. According to Lazzarelli, *CHI*. 18 contains a doctrine that can be connected to that of the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil spoken of in Genesis 2. 9 (chap. 6. 2–3). The tree of life (cf. Genesis 3. 22) signifies the contemplation of God and the attainment of wisdom and eternal life (chaps 2. 9, 8. 2), whereas the tree of the knowledge of good and evil signifies the desire for and interest in ephemeral things (chap. 9. 2). But how is it possible, the King objects, for God to have prohibited the knowledge of what he himself had created? Lazzarelli replies that the prohibition does not mean that God did not want his works to be known; it means that he did not want man to devote himself

¹²⁴ 'Quicquid enim hic de vera felicitate investigabimus et ab evangelica doctrina et ab Hermetis praeceptis hauriemus.'

¹²⁵ For the present considerations, see Moreschini, *Dall'Asclepius*, pp. 209–10.

¹²⁶ This statement is softened in the second version of the dialogue, that edited by Lefèvre d'Étaples: *Mosem enim Hebraeum [...] transtulisse eam putant ex Aegypto*.

to them beyond measure, attributing to them a weight and an importance that they cannot have. Ultimately, God does not want man to pursue earthly things, although he created them for man's own good, nor does he want man to neglect the contemplation of heavenly things (chap. 9. 3–4). At the King's request, Lazzarelli supports this interpretation (chap. 10. 2) with various Old Testament passages (Proverbs 2. 16–18, 9. 1–6) and, at the same time, in chap. 10. 5, with a quotation from *Poimandres* 18. Several unusual expressions from Proverbs are explained: the water of the cistern in one's own house stands for the knowledge of divine things (chap. 11. 1–2), whereas the water provided by the woman from outside stands for the knowledge of things unrelated to our moral perfection (chap. 11. 3). The giants spoken of in Ecclesiasticus represent men who, trusting only in their own powers, are interested exclusively in sensible and material things and do not raise themselves up higher. Pontano, as suits a man of letters, also proposes a philosophical interpretation of Hesiod's myth of Pandora (see *Op.* 42–82). It symbolizes man's concern with false and transitory things, which leave only hope in the soul (chap. 12. 3) (see also above, p. 169). Indeed, veiling truth behind the invention of poetic fables is a stratagem common to wisdom both pagan (Hermes, Pythagoras, Empedocles) and Christian (the prophets of the Old Testament) (chap. 13. 1–4).

As for the women of Apocalypse 14. 4 (with whom those who follow the Lamb have not defiled themselves), they symbolize the charms and the attachments of the senses (chap. 14. 1–2). As long as the rays of wisdom that permit us to know God and his angels shine in the soul, no falsehood can reach us from outside. If, however, the light of the mind is dimmed, then behold, the friends of darkness will arise (chap. 14. 2). This is all supported by a series of biblical passages (chap. 14. 3–4), to which is added one of Hermes (chap. 14. 5). From man's original dignity (when he was inhabited by the spirit of God), from the light of knowledge, we have fallen by fault of original sin, itself the result of the knowledge of (and thus of the attachment to) good and evil, that is, bodily things. Wretched and woeful is now the condition of man, who has become the prey of death and sin (chap. 15); for this, too, Lazzarelli supplies a quotation from Hermes (*Ascl.* 24).

But man can still return to his original condition, as Christ himself was the first to say (cf. John 6. 62) (chap. 16. 1) and as was then taught by the Rabbis (chap. 16. 2). All that Lazzarelli has said thus far is now taken up and restated in verse form, as a poem of regret and lament for the misery and fall of man (chap. 17). Then Lazzarelli returns to the question from which he began: how to attain happiness, which consists in knowing oneself. To know oneself it is necessary to know God, just as we are able to recognize an image reflected in water or one portrayed on a coin once we know which person is being represented (chap. 18. 2). Indeed,

it is common knowledge that first Moses (Gen. 1. 26), then St Paul (1 Cor. 11. 7), and finally Philo of Alexandria (*De plantatione* 5. 15) said that man is the image of God, and thus to know God is to know oneself. Hermes' voice crops up again at this point. In the *Pimander* (chap. 12. 14–15) he said that the father of the universe had created a man similar to himself (*Crater* 18. 3–5).¹²⁷ Knowing God in his profundity is impossible (chap. 19. 1–2), but God became flesh and, contrary to what Plato teaches,¹²⁸ had a true and direct relationship with man (chap. 19. 4). We can know him in the way proposed by Dionysius the Areopagite, that is, in his relationship with us (chap. 19. 5). More precisely, regarding the nature of God, we know his existence as a Trinity (chap. 20. 1–3), as the cause of the universe, and as the creator of man, in whom he took pleasure and who deserves praise as his chief work (chap. 20. 4–5). This is a vigorous declaration of orthodoxy on Lazzarelli's part, although based on an eclectic congeries of sources. In response to a more precise question from the King, who asks him what the soul of man is, Lazzarelli draws on Hebraic Cabala: the soul is the light of God (chap. 21. 1–2), or rather, as Philo teaches, it is the image and the imprint of the Word. Furthermore, according to Hermetic teaching, the soul is the Word of God who sees and hears in us (chap. 21. 3). If man remains mindful of the nobility of his origin, he will not sink into the mud of this world but will raise himself up towards pure and sublime reality (chap. 21. 4–5). Man's dignity, which in other authors is treated in a rhetorical or literary way, is explained here according to Hermetic doctrine: it derives from his noble origin, which is divine, as *Poimandres*, chap. 21 attests. As a result of Lazzarelli's lofty teaching, the King now feels himself transformed and enhanced in his spiritual life (chap. 22. 1). The true man, then, is the one who preserves the divine order and attains the end for which he was created. This end consists in the contemplation of God, to which the King and all of us must direct our physical and mental powers: 'worship, admire, praise, and contemplate God', Lazzarelli urges (chap. 22. 4), and then, in confirmation of his own precept, he intones a long hymn in honour of God, exalting his might and redemptive power (chap. 23). The praise of God is prompted by a vehement, burning love; contemplation engenders love, and love directs the human mind to its creator (chap. 24. 1–2). This ascent of the soul seems to occur by means of a process of ecstasy, through which man, although still in his body, goes out of himself (chap. 24. 3). At this point, in response to the King's

¹²⁷ This Christian interpretation ('similar') is based on Ficino's translation; the Greek text says 'the same' as himself, as we saw above, p. 157.

¹²⁸ This doctrine goes back to Plato's *Symposium* (203a), but it had been disseminated above all by the Platonism of the Imperial Age. It is found in Apuleius (*De deo Socratis* 4. 128) and others.

request to be introduced to the praxis of contemplation, Lazzarelli returns to the subject of God's nature. Following a typical Hermetic (cf. *CH* 1. 9; *Ascl.* 20–21) and Orphic (cf. *Hymni Orphici* 9. 4, 32. 10, 42. 4) doctrine, he says that God is both male and female and thus fertile with generation (chap. 24. 4). If God is fertile, then so is man, who has been made in his image and likeness (chap. 25. 1), but the fertility in question is that of the mind (chap. 25. 2). The human mind has received not only fertility as a gift from God but also immortality. Fertility and immortality produce a divine offspring (chap. 25. 3); it is not constituted solely, as the King thinks, by the arts (which can be considered the product of the human mind) but by a true generation of beings that are akin to their generator (chap. 25. 4).

Before enunciating this revelation Lazzarelli is possessed by a streak of inspiration, produced by the spirit of Christ within him. With language characteristic of ecstatic visions and mystery revelations, he intones, first in poetic prose and then in a poem proper, a hymn to the sublimity of the revelation he is about to communicate to everyone. As the heavenly Father creates angels, thus the true man, who is the Hermetist and the true Christian, generates divine souls that delight in the good of mankind. They send him the dreams that provide him with portents of the future; they aid him; they reward good men and defend them from evil, thus fulfilling the will of God the Father. Happy is the man who knows these capacities of his! He is not inferior to the gods (chap. 27). Lazzarelli has thus revealed a mystery, one which must be kept from the ears of the uninitiated at all costs (chap. 28. 1–2).

On this point Lazzarelli expresses himself (perhaps intentionally) opaquely. What he means by the generation of souls is utterly ambiguous. According to Kristeller, Lazzarelli means the generation of other souls initiated into Hermetic doctrine, seeing as how he speaks of an actual 'generation' of souls, and not of the 'production' of doctrines or arts.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, Lazzarelli might be adopting the doctrine of the *Asclepius*, which, as was noted above, created more than a few problems for Ficino on account of its magical and pagan character — and this despite all of Lazzarelli's protests of orthodoxy. Man, too, then, would have the power to create gods; thus Lazzarelli also speaks of the creation of intellectual beings (*mentes*: chap. 26. 1). He was probably also apt to understand this generation of souls as a creation of demons through the practice of magic. The souls can protect the just man from the dangers threatening him. They provide him with dreams and knowledge of the future, thus granting him superhuman powers. In Lazzarelli, too, then, we can find the mixture of Hermetism and magic so common in the Renaissance.

¹²⁹ Kristeller, *Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli*, pp. 238–40.

Hanegraaff, however, understands this passage differently.¹³⁰ According to him, the 'creation of souls' is actually possible for whoever, like Lazzarelli, is a Christian Hermetist, instructed in the new revelation of Giovanni Mercurio da Correggio and thus in possession of not only Hermetic but also Cabalistic doctrines. This hidden knowledge allows the Christian Hermetist to imitate the supreme power of God, who was the first to 'create' souls, and to succeed in performing the same operation. Hanegraaff's interpretation is very attractive, but one is forced to wonder how Lazzarelli would have been able to escape the charge of heresy, considering that Ficino himself, in order to avoid this charge, proceeded so cautiously (as we saw above).

Very few have taught men this esoteric doctrine. The first of all was Hermes; then, as the Hebrew masters tell us, came Enoch and Abraham. Among pagan wise men, we find hints in Plato and Philo of Alexandria (chap. 29. 1–5). But more than anyone it was the Messiah who taught men this doctrine (Lazzarelli often uses the title of 'Messiah' for Christ, a sign of his strong messianic tendencies),¹³¹ when he said: 'And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring. And there shall be one fold, and one shepherd' (chap. 29. 8).¹³² Thus Hermetic revelation coincides with Christian revelation, and Lazzarelli, along with Ficino and so many philosophers of sixteenth-century Italy, proposes the famous concept of *pia philosophia*, given shape in the first instance of course by the teachings of the Old and New Testaments, but also by the great philosophers of Antiquity — all equally inspired by God, and all, in one way or another, in possession of the truth.

Cabalists, Lazzarelli continues, also understand the words of Genesis 25. 5–6 ('And Abraham gave all that he had unto Isaac. But unto the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts') to mean that Abraham bequeathed magic to the sons of his concubines, but to Isaac he gave the secrets of God. Yet, he notes, in his own day Cabala was totally unknown to all but one (chap. 30. 3). This one person expert in Cabala must be Pico della Mirandola, as was noted previously by Kristeller although according to Hanegraaff it is Mercurio da Correggio, since nowhere in his writings does Lazzarelli make any reference to Pico.¹³³ At the end

¹³⁰ *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, ed. by Hanegraaff and Bouthorn, pp. 90–96.

¹³¹ As observed by Kristeller ('Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli', p. 240), these eschatological interests group Lazzarelli with Giovanni Mercurio da Correggio; thus we are dealing with a religious, rather than a philosophical, Hermetism.

¹³² 'Habeo alias oves, quae non sunt ex hoc ovili, quas oportet me adducere. Et tunc fiet unum ovile et unus Pastor.' Lazzarelli is quoting from John 10. 16.

¹³³ Kristeller, 'Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli', p. 226; Hanegraaff also thinks that this 'one man' might be Yohanan Alemanno (*Lodovico Lazzarelli*, ed. by Hanegraaff and Bouthorn, p. 263

Lazzarelli thanks Christ for having taught the Christian mysteries, and he sings a particularly affected hymn (chap. 30) in which Christ is praised under the name of Pimander. This is an echo of what was said at the beginning: 'The very one who in the mind of Hermes was Pimander, has deigned to live in me as Jesus Christ' (chap. 1. 2). Consequently, not only do Hermetism and Christianity agree in saying that the inspirer of Hermes' doctrines was Christ himself, who gave mankind the doctrine of salvation, but Lazzarelli is the very prophet of this union.

Regarding its sources, the *Crater Hermetis*, like Ficino, draws on texts which had by then become canonical: in addition to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*, Lazzarelli makes use of the Platonic-Christian tradition composed of Plato, Philo of Alexandria, Porphyry, and Dionysius the Areopagite. More noteworthy, though, is Lazzarelli's interest in Hebrew sources. The Rabbis' interpretation of the Bible is partially known to him, and in this regard he is clearly distinguished from all his contemporaries with the exception of Pico (or Mercurio da Correggio, as was just said), to whom he refers, albeit without naming him, precisely for his knowledge of Cabala. Like Ficino, furthermore, Lazzarelli also believes that Hermes' teaching is extremely ancient, the oldest of all pagan wisdom, and that it derives directly from Egyptian wisdom, which was also the source, by a different route but at the same time, for Moses' teaching.

Even more than in Ficino, however, Lazzarelli's Christian Hermetism is distinguished by its emphasis on the value of pagan and Egyptian wisdom. These are placed on the same level as the Bible and are given the same value. Of greater significance is the fact that Lazzarelli claims to be inspired by God; he takes on the role not only of master, but also, and first and foremost, of prophet. His doctrine of salvation and spiritual renewal is, it is true, based on a mixture of Christian and Hermetic theology, but it was in the first place directly inspired by the spirit of God. The beginning of the dialogue is of the utmost importance in this regard. There it is said that the same Christ Jesus who dwelled in the mind of Hermes as Pimander deigned to plant his seed in Lazzarelli's spirit ('ipse qui in Hermetis

n. 224). It is well known, furthermore, that Hermetism also spread in Jewish cultural circles in the second half of the fifteenth century. As noted by F. Lelli ('Ermetismo e pensiero ebraico', *Bulletin de Philosophie Médiévale*, 35 (1993), 92–103 (p. 98)), in the fifteenth century Jewish circles, especially in Italy, demonstrate a dedicated attempt to re-evaluate the Hermetic tradition, probably due to the influence of contemporary humanist speculation. Thus Yohanan Alemanno (c. 1435–1504) knew Hermetic literature by way of medieval Jewish-Arabic texts, and he read the Hermetic works known in fifteenth-century Italy. There was opposition, too: Elia del Medigo (c. 1460–93) rejected magical currents and the Neoplatonic-Hermetic interpretation of Cabala. Further bibliography on Lazzarelli's Hebrew sources is indicated by Hanegraaff in his edition (pp. 76–96).

mente Pimander erat, in me Christus Iesus incolatum facere dignatus est'). At the beginning of the *Poemander*, in fact, we read that

once, when thought came to me of the things that are and my thinking soared high and my bodily senses were restrained [...] an enormous being completely unbounded in size seemed to appear to me and call my name [...] Poimandres, Nous of sovereignty. (chap. 1)

Just as transcendent Nous had descended into Trismegistus, Lazzarelli was penetrated by its equivalent, the Christian Nous, that is, Christ, as taught by the Christian Platonism of patristic literature. Thus Lazzarelli received divine illumination, and its fruit is the teaching he goes on to impart to Ferdinand of Aragon.¹³⁴ The fusion of Christianity and Hermetism is thus justified not by a historico-critical examination of textual sources, but by a dogmatic and religious posture. As a result the *Crater Hermetis* has a unique status in the Hermetic literature of the Renaissance.

Lazzarelli and Ficino

The *Corpus Hermeticum* naturally has a central place in Lazzarelli's writings. Nevertheless we must note that he (like Ficino, ultimately) only uses the Hermetic treatises, and that he is not familiar with the fragments (especially those we can now read in Stobaeus's *Anthologium*), knowledge of which would however become increasingly widespread in the next century, for example with Agostino Steuco.

Truly strange is that all of Lazzarelli's quotations of the Hermetic treatises come from the fourteen that had been translated by Ficino, and none from those he himself translated and that are found in the famous Viterbo codex, which he possessed. In my opinion, this is due to the fact that CH XVI and XVII are lacking in theological content and were not as important, for Lazzarelli, as treatises I–XIV. According to Hanegraaff, however, Lazzarelli was also inspired by the final treatises of the *Corpus*, and especially by treatise XVI, that is, the so-called *Diffinitiones Asclepii*.¹³⁵ Evidence is provided (in Hanegraaff's opinion) by the fact that in the *Diffinitiones* the student is a king who is initiated first by Asclepius and then by Tat, whereas the last treatise concludes with a eulogy of the same king. Thus in Lazzarelli's *Crater* we also find a king and a teacher.¹³⁶ Hanegraaff emphasizes the novelty of

¹³⁴ Lazzarelli's stance, viz. that he has been filled with the spirit of Christ that had already been in Trismegistus, is also characteristic of Giovanni Mercurio (i.e. Hermes) da Correggio: see Kristeller, 'Marsilio Ficino e Lodovico Lazzarelli', p. 248.

¹³⁵ *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, ed. by Hanegraaff and Bouthorn, p. 57.

¹³⁶ For further examples of influence, see n. 9 to Hanegraaff's edition of the *Crater*.

the dialogue's design, in which the author portrays himself as an inspired master endowed with a semi-divine nature, and as an initiator into the Hermetic mysteries, despite the fact that his students (the King of Naples Ferdinand of Aragon and his secretary Pontano) enjoy a much higher social status than he.

For treatises I–XIV, Lazzarelli employs Ficino's translation (as is logical), although the text does not seem to have been followed to the letter. One must wonder which edition of Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (after the editio princeps of 1471) Lazzarelli used, and whether this might suffice to explain the divergences. It cannot be ruled out, though, that the quotations also differ because Lazzarelli intended to 'embellish' them and put them more in line with the 'tone' of his own work, despite the fact that such a procedure would seem unusual and inappropriate if judged by modern standards. Let us consider a few examples.

In *Crater* 5. 1 Lazzarelli quotes *CH* 1. 3 with the following alteration: *quae cupis* instead of *quae optas*.

Crater 6. 2 = *CH* 1. 18 *ac opera: atque opera* is Ficino's translation, and thus the alteration is hardly significant. The Hermetic quotation is interpreted as a reference to the necessity of knowing oneself, which had provided the point of departure for the discussion in *Crater* 2. 3. In fact, Lazzarelli enlarges the meaning of the Hermetic text and of Genesis 2. 9, where the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is spoken of, with the following words: 'In his Hermetis enim verbis et lignum vitae in quo vivimus et lignum scientiae boni et mali, quod nobis affert interitum, continetur. Cuius caput praecepti, ut videtis, est ut nosmet ipsos dignoscamus.'

Crater 9. 4 = *CH* v. 3, with no discrepancy in the quotation.

Crater 10. 5 = *CH* 1. 18 *fore causam*: Ficino *causam esse scite*.

Crater 14. 5 = *CH* 1. 13 *in patre suo*: Ficino *in tempore suo*. Here the alteration seems to be more significant. The Greek text is totally different: *en toi pyri*. Lazzarelli emphasizes that man himself wants 'to create' after having seen how the Father had created everything. He probably seeks to direct his readers to heed his doctrine of human 'creation', which in Ficino, on the other hand, remained more or less in obscurity and was not expressly declared. In the same quotation Lazzarelli reads *omnium*, instead of Ficino's *rerum omnium*, perhaps wanting to understand the generation of all of mankind instead of the creation of all things.

Hanegraff notes that the last part of the quotation contains an addition (made by Ficino) that is not found in the original Greek: 'unde a contemplatione patris ad sphaeram generationis delapsus est'.¹³⁷ That is, man, also wanting to create like

¹³⁷ Hanegraaff, *Lodovico Lazzarelli*, p. 211 n. 113.

God, abandoned his original state of contemplation to devote himself to earthly and material things. In Hanegraff's view, Lazzarelli approved and adopted this addition of Ficino. Nevertheless, we must be aware that this 'adoption' was not necessarily 'conscious', as if Lazzarelli had the Greek text in front of him and, taking note of Ficino's addition, considered it fitting and appropriate.

A little later, in a quotation of *CH* I. 15, there is a discrepancy that, although not serious from a doctrinal point of view, is nevertheless noteworthy. Lazzarelli reads 'homo harmonia superior extitit', whereas Ficino's translation is 'non igitur harmonia superior obstitit'. Ficino's translation is obviously faulty; perhaps Lazzarelli corrected it personally. Lazzarelli's quotation continues 'in harmoniam [*in harmoniam autem* in Lefèvre d'Étaples's edition, *in harmoniam vero* in Ficino] delapsus [*lapsus* Ficino] servus effectus est'.

The next quotations in *Crater* 18. 5 (= *CH* I. 12) and *Crater* 21. 3 (= *CH* I. 6) do not exhibit divergences, whereas *Crater* 21. 5 (= *CH* I. 21) is subjected to a noteworthy stylistic revision. Lazzarelli adds to Ficino's translation, with a strongly emotive and sermonizing tone, the words 'reminiscere, homo, reminiscere', and he alters the translation itself ('quoniam ex vita et luce constat omnium pater, ex quo natus est homo') rewriting it as 'quia lux et vita Deus est et pater, ex quo natus est homo'.

Crater 25. 3 contains not a quotation but an allusion to *CH* XII. 12:

Notice this also, my child, that to mankind — but not to any other living being — god has granted these two things, mind and reasoned speech, which are worth as much as immortality [*quae quidem eiusdem ac immortalitas praetii esse censentur* is Ficino's translation]. If one uses these gifts as he should, nothing will distinguish him from the immortals; instead, when he has left the body, both these gifts will guide him to the troop of the gods and the blessed.

The allusion condenses Lazzarelli's main point: mind and speech are as precious as immortality, and whoever uses these two natural capabilities properly is in no way different from immortal beings; indeed, he will be placed in the troop of the blessed. Lazzarelli uses the Hermetic discourse to enunciate a conception that is particularly important to him, and it is none other than the one that caused such great 'scandal': that of the soul that 'generates' other souls. The human mind is not only an image of the divine mind, it has also been given fertility and immortality as gifts from God. This 'generation', which is wholly different from the mind's generation of the sciences and the arts (chap. 25. 4), is explained in the next chapter (26).

The last quotation, found in *Crater* 29. 3 and taken from *CH* IX. 4, is also of particular interest. Lazzarelli applies the passage, which talks about Hermetic wisdom, to his own personal conception of the aforementioned *arcanum mysterii* of

the creation of souls, which he sought to demonstrate on the basis of Cabala. 'Qui se huic sapientiae dedicant' ('those who devote themselves to this wisdom'), according to the Hermetic text as quoted by Lazzarelli, live like strangers to the world. They are disliked by the masses and are mocked by all, as Plato had said (Lazzarelli correctly observes; cf. *Phaedr.* 249d). Ficino's translation is 'Qua de causa si qui huic se cognitioni dedicant, nec ipsi vulgo placent', and the rest of Lazzarelli's quotation agrees with Ficino's translation. The most important thing is that Lazzarelli has substituted *sapientiae* for *cognitioni*, that is, the 'gnosis' of the Hermetic text. Wisdom is something divine, because it is in accord with the secret teachings of Moses and the Hebrew Mecubales. Thus it is superior to Hermetic gnosis, which is the external, non-religious aspect of Hermes' doctrine.

In conclusion, Lazzarelli used Ficino's translation freely. Most importantly, he used it to elaborate his own personal doctrine of the generation of souls and secret wisdom, a doctrine that was not implicit in the Greek text and which Ficino himself adopted only in part.

Of interest, finally, is *Crater* 29. 1, where we read, 'in dialogo ad Asclepium, qui teleios Logos inscribitur'. This title is not found in the *Asclepius* itself, but in Lactantius (*Div. instit.* IV. 6. 4) and Quodvultdeus, whom Lazzarelli probably read while he was seeking out Hermetic texts. It should be noted, furthermore, that the version edited by Lefèvre d'Étaples substitutes 'qui teleios Logos inscribitur' with 'qui de divina voluntate inscribitur', which is the title Ficino had given to the *Asclepius*. Did Lazzarelli change his translation? Or is Lefèvre closer to Ficino than to Lazzarelli? At any rate, the *argumenta* prefacing Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* are his; thus Lefèvre certainly knew Ficino.

In *Crater* 30. 4 Lazzarelli also describes Pimander ('Pimander[...] ab Hermete et mens et verbum *divinae potentiae* interpretatur') using the interpretation that Ficino had given to the Hermetic text ('authenticas nous', fol. 2^r; see p. 156).

Note on the Hebrew Sources of the Crater Hermetis (by Enrico Norelli)

Lazzarelli demonstrates knowledge of the Talmud, including the Sepher Zohar (*Book of Illumination*), the great source of Hebrew mysticism from the Middle Ages on, whose chief part is the work of Moses ben Shem Tov de León (d. 1305). He also shows his acquaintance with haggadic (Moses ha-Darshan), normative (Maimonides), and mystical (Sepher Yetzirah, Enoch) literature. In some cases it is difficult to point to a precise passage, since we do not know what form of the text he used.

Crater 13. 3. *Moses de Aegypto* or *Aegyptius* is the name commonly used to refer to Moses Maimonides, the great codifier of Talmudic law (1135–1204). Here the

reference is to his work *Mishneh Torah* ('Repetition of the Torah'), but the passage is not found in the *Hilkhot Melakhim* ('Laws on the Kings'), the fifth treatise of the fourteenth book ('Book of Judges'), but in the first book (*Sepher ha-Madda*, 'Book of Knowledge'), fifth treatise (*Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 'Laws on Repentance', 8. 3–4); see also Maimonides' treatise, or letter, 'On Resurrection', chap. 8. The oversight might be due to the fact that the final part of the treatise on the kings is dedicated to messianism and eschatology, and the passage quoted by Lazzarelli is eschatological.

Crater 16. 2. The passage closest to this quotation seems to be *Zohar* 1. 57 b.

Crater 20. 2 and 29. 6. The source is the commentary on Genesis (*Bereshit Rabba*), a Midrashic collection going back to Moses ha-Darshan ('the interpreter'), a haggadist of the eleventh century born in Narbonne. It has not come down to us in that form, but we do have the Midrash that was based on it, *Genesis Rabbati*. The text of the *Bereshit Rabba* was reconstructed and published by H. Ch. Albeck in 1940, but I have not been able to find the two passages there. Nor have I found them in Raymond Martin's *Pugio Fidei* (thirteenth century), a vast apologetic work against the Jews that is full of quotations from Hebrew texts, including, among others, Moses ha-Darshan's *Bereshit Rabba*.

Crater 21. 2. The *Zohar* (1. 83 b) contains the doctrine of man's triple soul ('nephesh, ruah, neshama'), in which context the simile of the candle is found.

Crater 22. 2. Babylonian Talmud, Seder Nezikin, treatise *Avodah Zarah* 9 a.

Crater 29. 1. I have not been able to find Lazzarelli's reference in the Ethiopian book of Enoch, nor in the Slavic one ('Book of the Secrets of Enoch'), nor in the Hebrew one (the so-called third book of Enoch, more correctly *Sepher Hekhalot*). Enoch, also with the heavenly name of Metatron, appeared as the angel who revealed the heavenly secrets in mystical Hebrew literature, most of which has still not been published, much less translated. Hence the difficulty of identifying the quotation.

Crater 29. 2. The *Sepher Yetzirah* is a famous mystical Hebrew treatise, attributed to Abraham, that deals with the relationship between the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the order of creation. The last part contains information on the creation of man and the correspondence between the letters of the alphabet and the parts of the body. Lazzarelli's quotation, however, is not found in the *Sepher Yetzirah* proper.¹³⁸ Instead it comes from one of the ancient commentaries on the book (in their own right quite influential in the context of Hebrew

¹³⁸ Which can be consulted in I. Gruenwald's critical edition in *Israel Oriental Studies*, 1 (1971), 132–77.

mysticism) that contain actual instructions for creating a man (the Golem), beginning with the virgin soil of a mountain. See especially Eleazar of Worms's commentary and that of the pseudo-Saadya.¹³⁹

Crater 30. 3. Zohar 1. 133 b (cf. 1. 100 b).

Ficino's Orbit

Michael Marullus, probably influenced by the Hermetism spread by Marsilio Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, also considered *Aeternitas* a divinity proper and dedicated a hymn to it (*Hymni naturales* 1. 5).¹⁴⁰

Paolo Lucentini has noted that certain commentators of Dante's *Commedia* — Benvenuto da Imola in the fourteenth century, and Giovanni Bertoldi da Serravalle, in his commentary to his Latin version of the Comedy, in 1416–17 — knew the most famous sentences of the *Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum*, and that later (in 1481) Cristoforo Landino also used doctrines of the *Liber* in his commentary on Dante's work.¹⁴¹

Doctrines of the *Asclepius*, although portrayed somewhat superficially, are also found in Landino's *Disputationes Camaldulenses*.¹⁴² All evils, Landino notes, come from bodily matter, which the philosophers call *silva*. It retards, blunts, and

¹³⁹ See the relevant passages quoted — also with the use of unpublished manuscripts — and commented by G. Scholem, *La Kabbalah e il suo simbolismo*, trans. by Anna Solmi (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), pp. 232–38. The original German text is *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik* (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1960), and it is also available in English: *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. by R. Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1965).

¹⁴⁰ J. Chomarat ('Sur l'interprétation des *Hymnes Naturels* de Marulle', *Revue des Études Latines*, 65 (1987), 228–43) believes that the *Hymni Naturales* as a whole are nothing other than a celebration of the Christian Trinity and its qualities, under the veil of the myths and language of the Graeco-Latin world. This is all probable, but in what context could such a mixed pagan and Christian celebration have been conceived, if not in the syncretistic environment of Florence at the end of the fifteenth century? This by way of response to Chomarat's smug objection to my hypothesis (C. Moreschini, 'Osservazioni sugli *Hymni Naturales* di Michele Marullo', *Res Publica Literarum*, 6 (1982), 191–204 (p. 233 n. 15)). At any rate, he manages to say nothing about Marullus's hymn to *Aeternitas* (pp. 234–35). But his inability to say anything new on these issues can best be seen in his recent edition of Marcello Palingenio Stellato's *Zodiacus Vitae* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1997).

¹⁴¹ Lucentini, 'Il "Liber vigintiquattuor philosophorum" nella "Commedia" dantesca', in *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, pp. 250–57.

¹⁴² Citations are from C. Landino, *Disputationes Camaldulense*, ed. by P. Lohr (Florence: Sansoni, 1980).

disturbs the mind, dimming it with darkness (cf. *Poim.* 6. 3). All vices come from ignorance, as the Stoics say, but this had already been taught by ‘that famous Mercury whom the Greeks, on account of his divine intelligence, call Thrice-great’ (cf. Lactantius, *Div. instit.* I. 6. 3; *De ira* 11. 12). Mercury defines *silva* as *malignitas* (*Ascl.* 14–15) (*Disputationes Camaldulenses*, III, 129. 26–130. 7).

According to Landino, there is a fixed and *rectus* order of all things, as Trismegistus, Homer, and Plato explained. These wise men said that there is a golden chain, beginning from the *fons* of nature and reaching by degrees all the way to the last dregs. Its origin is the *essentia* of God, second is his power, third his wisdom, fourth his will (the Trinity of God, earlier indicated by Ficino as power, wisdom, and love). Then come *fatum* and the *anima mundi*, then the demons of heaven, those of ether, those of water, humid ones, those of earth, and last, *hyle*, which we call *silva*, which stands firm in the lowest point. This list corresponds to that of *Asclepius* 39. Thus God is the beginning, and *silva* is the last point on the chain: ‘est igitur Deus et silva’ = *Asclepius* 14: ‘Fuit deus et hyle’. *Materia* is called such because it is *mater*, God is *pater*, and form is the *proles*. God embraces all the forms from Antiquity on; matter, however, has no precise form but possesses all forms ‘innata sibi recipiendi facultate’. For this reason Trismegistus justly says that the father and the mother are eternal, whereas the offspring is mortal. God conceives by means of ‘infusio spiritus divini’, which Trismegistus calls ‘anima mundi’ (cf. *Ascl.* 14–17) (III, 177. 29–178. 7).

As is well known, Ficino’s translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* was itself translated very soon into the Florentine vernacular, a task assigned to Tommaso Benci, given that Ficino did not have time to do it personally.¹⁴³ Benci’s translation contains the passage about Trismegistus’s death that was attributed to Calcidius (but which actually came from the *Liber Alcidi*, as was said above, p. 108). Benci highlights the religious aspect of the great Egyptian sage’s teaching, as can be read in his dedication:

I concede that Mercury was a pagan; but, having read and reread this work of his many times, his writing seems to me to reveal much of the magnificence of God, who prodigiously bestows his grace on whoever is fit to receive it.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ *Il Pimandro di Mercurio Trismegisto*, trans. by Tommaso Benci (Firenze: Torrentino, 1548). I have partially modernized the punctuation in the quotation below.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Nonostante che avendo io letto et più volte trascorsa, questa opera di Mercurio; benche egli fusse de’l popolo gentile: mi pare che nel suo scrivere si manifesti molto la magnificenza di Dio: il quale è largo donatore di sua grazia, a chiunque è atto a riceverla.’

A treatise written in Florence in the fifteenth century attests to the diffusion of Hermetism, thanks to Ficino's translation, and to the attempt of Christians to appropriate its doctrines for themselves. It was originally part of a work in three books, now lost, which is supposed to have had the title of *Antiquarum religionum libri*.¹⁴⁵ The work was written by a certain Lorenzo di Domenico and dedicated to Bernardo del Nero, a member of Marsilio Ficino's circle.¹⁴⁶ It contains a long digression on Hermes Trismegistus, who is exalted as a priest and a prophet, the reformer of Egyptian religion, and the one who foresaw the fall of ancient religion and the coming of Christ. The author knows the titles of Trismegistus's two most important books: one on divine will, handed down under the title of *Asclepius*, and the other

on the power and wisdom of God, which Marsilio Ficino, that most noble Platonist and most excellent of all the philosophers of our age, recently translated to the happy memory of our magnificent Cosimo.¹⁴⁷

As Bartolucci notes, the excursus on Trismegistus modifies Eusebius of Caesarea's conception of history, according to which mankind became progressively estranged from the worship of the true God, later revealed with the coming of Christ. In that view, apart from rare exceptions (Socrates and Plato), pagan philosophers were no help in halting this lapse and revealing the principles of the true religion. Hermes, in contrast, had reached a partial knowledge of the truth.

¹⁴⁵ The work's first book, the only one extant, is found in MS Magliabechiano XXXVII 319 of the Biblioteca Nazionale in Florence; it was finished on 17 September 1473.

¹⁴⁶ This information from G. Bartolucci, 'Marsilio Ficino, Eusebio di Cesarea e un trattato sulle religioni degli Antichi', *Accademia*, 9 (2007), 37–55.

¹⁴⁷ 'della potestà et sapientia di Dio, el quale nuovamente Marsilio Ficino, platonico nobilissimo et di questa età di tutti e' filosofi prestantissimo, a la felice memoria del nostro magnifico Cosimo traduxe'. See Bartolucci, 'Marsilio Ficino, Eusebio di Cesarea', pp. 44–45.

PROLEGOMENA TO FRANÇOIS FOIX-CANDALE'S COMMENTARY ON THE *PIMANDER*

François Foix-Candale (Bordeaux, 1512–94), the scion of a venerable noble line, was a staunch Catholic in France during the ravaging wars of religion. He was named Bishop of Aire-sur-l'Adour, near Bordeaux, in 1570, and Cardinal in 1587. A friend of Montaigne, he was not only a philosopher but also a mathematician. In 1566 he published an edition of Euclid's *Elementa*, to which he appended a philosophical commentary that earned him the nickname 'France's Archimedes'. He was an alchemist and a student of mechanics. One of his contemporaries, Pierre De Brach, called him 'grand Prince, grand Prelat, grand Philosophe ensemble'. His status as a 'grand philosophe' must ultimately be understood as a sign of his pursuit of other disciplines as well which in the sixteenth century were considered worthy undertakings. One was Hermetism, which, according to Jeanne Harrie, must be seen as a larger unit, comprehending, that is, mathematics and alchemy.¹

In addition to being an authoritative exponent of Catholicism, he was certainly among the greatest Hermetic philosophers of the sixteenth century.² This is demonstrated by his annotated edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, divided into two volumes. The first contains the Greek text with a Latin translation:³ Mercurii

¹ My information is from the study, excellent on the historical plane, of J. E. Harrie, 'François Foix de Candale and the Hermetic Tradition in Sixteenth Century France' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 1975).

² A short but precise description of the man and his work can be found in the article devoted to him by A. Faivre, in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by W. J. Hanegraaff, in collaboration with A. Faivre, R. van den Broek, and J. P. Brach (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 375–77.

³ The volume is, significantly, dedicated to the God-fearing reader, who is wished steadfastness and uprightness.

Trismegisti Pimandras utraque lingua restitutus, *D. Francisci Flussatis Candallae industria. Ad Maximilianum Caesarem eius nominis Quartum*. Burdigalae, apud Simonem Millangium Burdigalensium Typographum via Iacoba, 1574. *Cum privilegio Regis*. The second volume contains a French translation with commentary, entitled: 'Le Pimandre de Mercure Trismegiste de la philosophie Chrestienne, Cognoissance du verbe diuin, et de l'excellence des oeuvres de Dieu, traduit de l'exemplaire Grec, avec collation de tres-amplis commentaires', *Par Francois Monsieur de Foix, de la famille de Candale, Captal de Buchs, etc. Euesque d'Ayre, etc.* A Tres-haute, tres-illustre, et tres-puissante Princesse, Marguerite de France, Roine de Nauarre fille & soeur des Rois tres-Chrestien, A Bourdeaux, Par S. Millanges, Imprimeur ordinaire du Roy, 1579. Avec Priuilege.

The edition is dedicated to Emperor Maximilian II (not IV, as erroneously appears in the title). Its aim is to present the Greek text in a new and more accurate form, together with a more diligent translation (in the volume containing the commentary) than had hitherto been available. When the first volume was published, Candale was attending to the preparation of the commentary in French, which he would dedicate to Queen Marguerite of Navarre, daughter of the Emperor. The work ends with the wish that God be kind to the undertaking.⁴ The date is 'ad 3. cal. Maias anno salutis 1574'.

For his Greek text Candale uses the edition of Adrianus Turnebus, first published in 1554; it contains the fourteen treatises translated into Latin by Ficino, plus a fifteenth that Turnebus had assembled from three fragments of Stobaeus and a passage from the Suda, and finally the sixteenth, the *Definitiones Asclepii*. Treatise XVII has been added to treatise XVI as chapter 14 in Candale's translation; it is not present in the Greek edition of Candale (i.e. Turnebus). Treatise XVIII is missing in both the Greek edition and in the French translation. The fifteenth treatise, to be more precise, is composed of the following: one fragment comprising chapters 1–9 and corresponding to Nock-Festugière's fragment II A; a second fragment (chap. 10) corresponding to fragment I; a third fragment (chap. 11) taken from Stobaeus (IV, p. 1087, 1–10 Hense); and finally, a fourth section (chap. 12) composed of the passage from the Suda, s.v. *Hermes Trismegistus*.⁵ Commenting on *CH*

⁴ It is interesting that God is called, in a mixture of Neoplatonism and Christianity, 'summum illud Bonum Optimum Maximum'.

⁵ See the edition of Adler, *Hermes ho Trismegistos*. Both the third fragment and the passage from the Suda are missing in the fourth volume of Nock-Festugière. We have provided precise information about these passages because until now scholars have merely said that the fifteenth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* is composed of certain fragments of Stobaeus (which is not completely correct) without indicating which ones.

xv. 11, p. 678, Candale observes that the third fragment's proper place would be treatise VIII, which speaks of death. Similarly, the passage from the Suda, which talks about the Trinity, could have been inserted into the first treatise. The Byzantine author, in fact, interprets the title 'thrice-great' as a reference to the Trinity (see p. 128), but a better interpretation, Candale notes, is that of those who attribute triple greatness to Mercury on account of his perfection in philosophy, priesthood, and kingship (p. 683).

The text and the commentary are divided in the traditional manner. Thus *Pimander* is the title of the work as a whole (as would be the case until Parthey's nineteenth-century edition), not of the first treatise, as Patrizi will clarify. What for us are the various treatises are for Candale the chapters of the *Pimander*.

As indicated above, the commentary in French was published five years after the text. The author justifies this somewhat noteworthy chronological delay in the preface to the second volume, saying that it was already finished in 1572 and had been brought to Paris to be printed, when on 26 August of that year numerous obstacles arose to impede its publication. Candale is referring to the infamous 'Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre', which precipitated politico-religious tumults that threw France into confusion, including Aquitaine, where he lived. Thus he lacked concentration for meditation and his studies. References to the sad conditions of contemporary France are found several more times in the course of the commentary. On pp. 299–300, Candale traces the ruin of man to the cunning of Satan, who sows heresy and dissent and has given rise to a dozen sects or divisions in the last fifty years; as I John 1 says, discord is the work of the Antichrist (see also p. 683). A demon, doing God's will, sent civil wars to France to punish its impiety and irreligiousness, its contempt and blasphemy of God (p. 717). The country has been rent by civil wars since 1559, and the demons will not cease instigating them unless divine mercy intervenes (p. 723).

Elsewhere Candale refers to his own personal experiences. Once he perceived the presence of demons in a town in the Pyrenees. They are also found in the mines of Germany (p. 293). He also speaks (p. 413) of 'our Gascony'.

There is no lack of opinions on contemporary personages and events. An interesting discussion takes place on pp. 742–45 of the commentary regarding the veneration of images of God: it should not be confused with idolatry, no matter what the Protestants say. With the aid of scripture Candale shows that Church doctrine distinguishes between *latría* and *douλία*. This means that all honour, reverence, service, and love are owed to God alone. Every image of God venerated by the Church contains three realities, namely, the simulacrum or the material image, the memory of the thing portrayed, and God, upon whom this memory depends.

That is why Tat also counsels King Ammon to venerate images (*CH* XVI. 14), for they represent a divine work of some kind. Either they are taken from the eternal exemplar or image of God, that is, from the ideas, or else, in the earthly world, they portray God's creations, which possess the form he gave them, or the saints, who provide examples or remembrance of God's will.

Candale refers polemically to Calvin. Calvin is wrong, he says, to affirm that men are unable to do good or bad on account of divine predestination, which supposedly decides, in exaltation of God's glory, that I am lost or damned and thus that I have no chance to intercede for myself:

And there are those who, under the pretext of serpentine devotion and fox-like humility, lead other poor dunces like themselves to shocking and execrable blasphemies, insinuating into their hearts the idea that God is the author of their damnation and their sin. (p. 174)

There are many in our times who, having learned this doctrine from certain ancient individuals of little sense, stubbornly maintain that God's will extends as much to vices as to virtues and think that God receives as much glory from willing man's salvation as he does from willing man's damnation. They do not consider Peter's⁶ words (pp. 174–75). This is said against the Calvinists (as noted in the margin of p. 176), who reproach us for our wavering. They say that evils and vices are the work of men, but brought about with the permission of God and not by one's own will, and they conclude that men do nothing without God's secret command and deliberate nothing that God has not ordained. In support they cite Psalm 113. This polemic crops up again on p. 643: Calvin believes that God is also the author of evil, but evil is produced by the imperfections in matter.

A reference to another great contemporary of Candale, Copernicus, is found on p. 701. Copernicus placed the sun at the centre of the universe, without assigning it any movement. Candale notes that the sun is not at the centre of the universe in a material sense, but at the centre of God's actions and powers, which are administered both by the sun and by the other heavenly bodies. The Hermetic passage that speaks of the sun (*CH* XVI. 7: 'il est assise au millieu, comme portant coronne au monde', translates Candale)⁷ must be understood after the manner of the ancients, who used 'crown' in the sense of 'belt'. It does not mean that the sun is placed above the world, like a crown is placed atop the head, but that, like a crown

⁶ Not in the canonical letters, but in the so-called pseudo-Clementines, as we shall see immediately below.

⁷ Reference numbers correspond to the treatises (which Candale still calls 'chapters') and the modern chapters of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

surrounds the highest part of the head, thus the sun, placed between the higher and lower planets, encircles the world with its movement.

Among the *auctoritates* of ancient Christianity used by Candale, an important place is occupied by the *Recognitiones* attributed to Clement of Rome, a Christian novel that exists in a Latin translation by Rufinus of Concordia; it is an ancient, albeit non-canonical, account of Peter's preaching and actions. The editio princeps of the *Recognitiones* appeared rather quickly, in Paris (1504), edited by Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples.⁸ As far as sixteenth-century readers were concerned, its subject and characters (especially Peter and Simon Magus) depicted the earliest Christian times. As a result the work attracted the interest of those who sought to imitate (or at least to know about) primitive Christianity. In that age of bitter controversies and harsh wars of religion, the most ancient Christian texts were employed to demonstrate the supposed continuity between the doctrine of one side in the struggle (Papists or Protestants) and the original message of the Gospels, and each competing faction identified its adversaries with the ancient heretics. This is a subject that deserves to be studied, if at the very least to clarify the function had by individuals like Peter and Clement. For they were traditionally linked to the Roman See, a point of strong disagreement and controversy in that century. As an apologist for the Catholic Church, to which, as Bishop of Ayre, he remained faithful, Foix-Candale also makes use of this ancient text. Peter, he says (*CH* I. 12, pp. 25 and 27), explains in one of his sermons the difference between the image and the likeness of God: man possesses the image, whether he wants it or not, because it pertains to his creation, whereas the likeness is something uncertain and contingent, especially after original sin.⁹ This is a reference to Peter's words in *Recognitiones* V. 5. The likeness of God, the apostle says again, consists in being just and religious and in doing wrong to no one (*CH* XI. 20, p. 471). Candale uses this sermon of Peter for his dispute with the Calvinists (p. 165).¹⁰

⁸ See I. Backus, 'Renaissance Attitudes to New Testament Apocryphal Writings: Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and his Epigones', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 51 (1998), 1169–98 (pp. 1192–94).

⁹ *CH* IV. 3, p. 150.

¹⁰ The *Recognitiones* reappear elsewhere in Candale's commentary. He recalls (*CH* x. 22, p. 401) the story of Simon Magus's necromancy with a virgin, told in the second book of the Christian novel; in *CH* x. 24, p. 408, he quotes Peter's words of *Recognitiones* III. 50 and 58. In *CH* xv. 3, p. 653, he refers to one of Simon Magus's acts of witchcraft: his transformation of the face of Faustianus, a character in the pseudo-Clementines, who magically takes on the appearance of Simon himself. He also recalls (*CH* xv. 6, p. 661) the long discussion about astrology and free will between Clement and his two brothers, on the one hand, and their father, on the other, which took place

Candale's commentary is enormous, nearly 750 pages long. The structure and dimensions recall the commentary of his contemporary, Annibale Rosselli.¹¹ To understand the French Hermetist's thought, it is necessary to read the commentary with continual reference to the Greek text, which is often different from that of Nock-Festugière, and especially with reference to Candale's own French translation, which diverges just as often from modern ones. The work has a strongly moralizing design: many chapters contain only Christian interpretations of a text whose contents, as the history of Hermetism has shown, encouraged it to be understood in that way.

Of note, finally, is the fact that on pp. 570–85 Candale devotes much careful thought to explaining the true nature of the sacrament of the Eucharist. He wrote a treatise on the Eucharist, which, as he says himself on p. 571, was unpublished. And it is still unpublished, but it was probably aimed at defending Catholic orthodoxy on this point against the strong objections of Protestants. In my opinion it deserves a modern edition.

The Hermetic Text and Candale's Account of its History

Candale claims in the preface to his translation to have been helped by Joseph Scaliger, a scholar unique for his vast knowledge of Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac, in addition to Latin. This aid enabled him (so he says) to find many errors of writing and translation in the Greek text¹² which had never been discovered before on account of general ignorance of Syriac and etymology. In his introduction to the text, Candale claims that Marsilio Ficino's Latin version can be considered a 'first attempt' ('velut sui laboris novale'); it served as the basis for the translation of Gabriel Prateolus (i.e. du Préau),¹³ which is likewise given a negative review.¹⁴ Candale is also

in Peter's presence and lasted several days. The three brothers did not know their father, nor did he know his sons, on account of the long separation that had divided them for very many years.

¹¹ A fundamental study on Annibale Rosselli is that of M. Muccillo, 'Plotino nel tardo Rinascimento', in *Platonismo Ermetismo e 'Prisca Theologia'*, Ricerche di storiografia filosofica rinascimentale (Florence: Olschki, 1996), pp. 195–289.

¹² Like Ficino before him, Candale considered the Greek text a translation from Egyptian carried out by Mercury himself.

¹³ Paris 1549 and 1557, the first edition in French of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the *Asclepius*, and Ludovico Lazzarelli's *Crater Hermetis*.

¹⁴ Here is Candale's judgment of his predecessors: 'nulla interpretandae rei sollicitudine ducti, ac eapropter ab authoris sententia subinde divagantes'.

critical of Ficino's interpretation (but one must also keep in mind that Candale is writing 110 years after Ficino's Latin translation, and progress had indeed been made in knowledge of the Greek language and interpretation of the Hermetic text).

Candale then quickly summarizes the diffusion of the Greek text in Western culture, repeating things that now are well known: that it was brought to Florence by Leonardo da Pistoia; that Ficino gave it the subtitle of *De potestate et sapientia Dei* and dedicated it to Cosimo de' Medici; furthermore that Ficino translated it into Latin for his patron hastily, providing it with an inadequate interpretation, altering certain passages, and omitting others; and that from that time on the treatise was widely diffused, partly because it turned out to be full of wisdom in accord with Sacred Scripture. The defects in Ficino's edition have caused Candale to ignore it and follow the Greek text directly, in order to get as close as possible to Mercury's language.¹⁵

Candale and Ficino

Candale generally seeks to resolve problems in the text by taking issue with Ficino, who, however (it is well to repeat), was primarily blazing the trail in his 1463 translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.¹⁶ One of the problems with which translators have always had to grapple (he says) is that of determining the meaning of *authentia*, a word used for the person of God ('the Mind of the *authentia*') at the beginning of the *Poimandres*. Candale notes that there is a Greek word, *authentēs*, which means 'lord' or 'guide', wherefore *authentia* means 'power' or 'authority'; Ficino interpreted it as 'thought of divine power' (*mens divinae potentiae*), adding the word 'divine' on his own initiative (however the context, as well as Candale's own observations on this point, show that the power mentioned in the *Poimandres* was in fact a divine one, and thus that Candale's interpretation does not differ from Ficino's).

The text of *CH* I. 18 (p. 70) is interpreted as follows: 'man's longing for matter is the reason for which he was made material and subjected to the imperfections of matter, which ultimately cause death and misery'. Ficino's translation was 'amorem corporis mortis causam esse scite', although the Greek text reads 'and the cause of death (is) desire'. But since desire can only aim at material things and not at divine

¹⁵ Candale's interest in a presumed original Egyptian version and the problems that translation from Egyptian to Greek might have caused is one of the most novel aspects of his work.

¹⁶ We have evaluated certain aspects of Ficino's Latin translation on pp. 156–59.

ones, Candale continues, it follows that love of the body or of a bodily thing, by separating us from God, is the cause of death.

Commenting on *CH* II. 8,¹⁷ Candale notes (p. 120) that Ficino was deceived in his translation of *ousiodes*, which he rendered as *substantialis*, because he did not observe the distinction proposed by the Hermetic passage between *substantia* and *essentia*. The criticized translation is not found in this passage, however, but in *CH* I. 15. Ficino, moreover, was led to translate as he did not only because the correspondence between the Greek and Latin terms seems obvious, but also because *substantialis* is used in a similar context in the *Asclepius* (chaps 7 and 19).

Regarding *CHX*. 1, Candale criticizes (p. 329) Ficino for incorrectly translating ‘illa siquidem augmenti diminutionisque appellata est’, where the referent for *illa*, he says, is unclear. The Greek text says instead: “nature” or “growth” is the term that applies to things that change and move’. This passage must be understood in the sense that the potency and virtue that are in God constitute the names and creation of the nature and growth of all the good in things that change. Things that change are those that have been created, both material and immaterial; immaterial creations are the divine virtues, which have been inserted into the forms of material things. Actually, the Greek text is corrupt, as can be seen in the modern edition, and even the solution proposed by Candale is frail.

On p. 361, commenting on *CHX*. 8, Candale rejects the widespread, and in his view erroneous, opinion that Mercury is alluding to metempsychosis. Such an interpretation is based on Ficino’s faulty translation (‘revoluto autem itinere in reptilia precipitans’). On the contrary, Mercury means to say that the soul turns to the veneration of earthly things. The term *reptilia* should not be understood literally as referring to reptiles, but as meaning the lowest and most contemptible realities.

In *CHI*. 8, Candale notes (p. 14) that the Greek text says ‘seeds of souls’, which he proposes correcting to ‘simple seeds’ on account of the affinity between *psychon*

¹⁷ We follow the textual divisions of Candale’s commentary. The text of Turnebus-Candale, however, does not correspond to the modern text, on account of discrepancies arising from the heavy corruption found at the beginning of the treatise. Nock and Festugière added an *excerptum* of Stobaeus to the beginning of the treatise, and thus the chapters no longer correspond between Candale’s edition and modern ones: Candale’s chap. 1 corresponds to 1–4, p. 33. 1 Nock-Festugière (*homologhetai*); 2 corresponds to chap. 4, from p. 33. 1 to chap. 6, p. 33. 9; 3 corresponds to chap. 6, from p. 33. 9 to chap. 7, p. 34. 1 (with a very different text); 4 corresponds to chap. 7, p. 34. 1–11; 5 corresponds to chap. 8; 6 to chap. 9; 7 to chaps 10–12, down to p. 36. 18 with Nock and Festugière’s addition; 8 corresponds to chap. 12, p. 36. 18 down to chap. 13; 9 to chaps 14–15; 10 to chap. 16; and 11 to chap. 17. We shall soon discuss the condition of the treatise and Candale’s own solutions.

(‘of souls’) and *psilon* (‘simple’). This proposal was not noted in Nock and Festugière’s modern edition, and indeed it is not convincing.

The beginning of the second treatise contains a serious philological problem, as the text is damaged.¹⁸ Nock and Festugière replaced it with a Hermetic fragment taken from Stobaeus (I. 18. 2–19. 2). Ficino had attempted to render the text, but the result, being only a literal translation, makes no sense: ‘ens atque ipsa divinitas dico nunc’. Candale devotes considerable attention to this quandary. After the texts of the *Pimander* had been published in three languages,¹⁹ he notes (pp. 97–98), he discovered (thanks to a new edition of Stobaeus) that the second treatise had been brought from Macedonia in an imperfect and damaged form, without its true beginning. Thus, seeing that the beginning of the Greek exemplar has the words ‘either God divinity, I now say’,²⁰ which makes no sense, he added a coordinating conjunction (‘either God (or) divinity’) and connected Stobaeus’s text to the mutilated ancient exemplar: ‘The place, then, is incorporeal, but the incorporeal is divinity, or God is divinity; I now say.’ Thus the preceding phrase of Stobaeus’s text ends with the first word of treatise II. Candale was thus the first to realize that the Hermetic text was damaged and to correct it with the fragment from Stobaeus.

CH IV. 9 contains a problem of translation: Candale proposes ‘il est grandement dur’ (p. 179), correcting the Greek text *skolios* to *skleros*, since ‘dur’ agrees, in his opinion, with the text’s meaning. The modern edition does not mention this proposal, either.

Regarding CH XII. 19, Candale translates ‘prophécies *dia dryos*’ as ‘par les arbres’ (p. 552). Thus he shows that he is aware that the Latin translation circulating at the time, *per Sibyllam*, must be corrected (it was a corruption introduced by scholars, as was discovered earlier by Genebrard). ‘The oracles transmitted by the Sibyls’, he notes, could not be contained in an Egyptian text such as that of Trismegistus, for it is certainly more ancient than the Greek world.²¹

¹⁸ See above (note 16).

¹⁹ I.e. Greek, Latin, and French: thus after 1554, the date of the edition containing Turnebus’s Greek text. Candale notes that Ficino’s text had been printed in Paris three times since 1552.

²⁰ This was Ficino’s translation, about which we have just spoken. But the text of Turnebus and Candale has the same initial lacuna as Ficino’s translation. Candale also corrected the title, substituting *Tat* for *Asclepius* and adding *logos katholikos* — which text was also accepted by Patrizi, as we shall see.

²¹ On this philological problem, see below, p. 284, n. 45.

Hermes Aegyptius

Egypt and the Egyptian Language

In the prefaces to the Greek and Latin edition, Candale confronts the problem of Hermes' original text, which he thought was written in Egyptian.

It was not without reason, he says, that Ficino had attributed the Greek translation of the Egyptian original to Hermes, who should therefore be thought capable of the task. But Ficino, in his opinion, does not explain how it was done. He merely says that Mercury first circulated his doctrines in Egyptian and, being an expert in Greek, then translated the volume and revealed the Egyptian mysteries to the Greeks. But Candale must deal with a problem: how to justify why a text that was supposed to remain secret was translated into Greek, especially since the practice of translating from Egyptian to Greek was explicitly condemned in one Hermetic text (*CH* XVI), the so-called *Diffinitiones Asclepii*. Ficino did not have to confront the problem because the *Diffinitiones Asclepii* were first translated into Latin by Ludovico Lazzarelli (around thirty years after 1463) and published in Greek by Turnebus in 1554 as the sixteenth treatise of the *Pimander*. In the *Definitiones* (chaps 2–3) Aesculapius warns King Ammon not to diffuse Egyptian doctrines in Greek, since the Greek language is not capable of properly expressing a secret doctrine like Hermetism; he also harshly criticizes the superficiality of the Greeks. How was it possible, then, that Hermes, despite the warning of his pupil Asclepius/Aesculapius to King Ammon, personally translated his Egyptian text into Greek?

Candale responds to this question in his commentary on *CH* XVI. 1, pp. 687–89, and his explanation gives us an idea of the total syncretism between Hermetism and Christian doctrine that inspired him. Here is his interpretation. Aesculapius was a profoundly wise individual.²² He became so famous as a doctor that God, desiring to place a sign of his own power in the desert, had an image raised there of a snake, as a symbol that could heal the bite of the ancient animal.²³ Aesculapius was a pupil of Mercury Trismegistus, and in the treatise in question (the *Definitiones*) he addresses King Ammon, who was himself an important figure. He was worshipped by the Ethiopians, who raised a temple to him in the valley of Meroe. That is where Queen Candace reigned, whose eunuch knew the apostles.²⁴

²² This is also said on p. 627.

²³ This is a reference to Numbers 21. 8–9. The snake, as is well known, would become the symbol of Aesculapius's medicine.

²⁴ See Acts 8. 27.

The difficulty constituted by Aesculapius's warning, Candale continues, results from the fact that the treatise expresses itself in a vague way typical of the ancients, and one still inadvertently employed by some. Thus we do not know which books Aesculapius is talking about here, whether they are his own or those of his teacher Mercury. In fact, Aesculapius means Mercury's books, if for no other reason than that Mercury would not have been able to see the books of his student and successor. Therefore when Aesculapius speaks of the books of Mercury he is relating the words of his master. Thus he beseeches King Ammon to make sure that the Greeks do not translate even one of Mercury's books, on account of the profligacy and pride of their language. That is, he fears that readers might take Mercury's statements at face value without thinking about the incorporeal and intelligible things to which the text refers. In the same way, the promises that God made to Moses were understood by the Jews merely according to their own understanding; they found them clear and simple, and nonetheless they did not understand them at all. The same thing also happened with Jesus Christ when he spoke of 'eating his body'.²⁵ But this does not belie — indeed, it supports — the fact that it was Mercury himself who translated his own books into Greek. The Egyptians, for their part, were the oldest people to devote themselves to the arts and the highest sciences and most profound knowledge, and thus they more than any other people had accustomed their language to express them. The Egyptian language, like all the others that are related to it (Ethiopian, Hebrew, Chaldaean, Syriac), loves brief and succinct expressions and signifies many things with few words (p. 690). Mercury, then, feared the translation of his books into Greek because he knew the Greeks' custom of collecting and importing everything into their own language, such that even in our own times, Candale continues, all the books on the notabilia of the ancient world are in Greek. They translated not out of honour and love of knowledge but out of a desire for glory. The Greeks were superior to all in the sciences, and thus they interpreted all things through their philosophy; that philosophy, however, was not inspired by God but was subject to the powers of nature. Nonetheless, when speaking about salvation and the true knowledge of God, one cannot stop at natural things but must turn to the supernatural, which is the origin of all the instruments of salvation. The philosophers ignore them, and that is why they have never known either salvation or eternal life but rather have stopped stubbornly at the knowledge of the effects of nature. Thus the Athenians mocked Paul.²⁶ As a

²⁵ See John 6. 53–58.

²⁶ See Acts 17. 32.

result, following the knowledge of nature (which is a thing of little value) and neglecting supernatural reality and invisible things, the Greeks rushed to their own ruin and perverted what Mercury had written. They let a wondrous and excellent doctrine sleep in the dust for three or four thousand years,²⁷ without daring to interpret it, using a translation that, not being fully understood, corrupted it on many points. This could have kept Mercury from being as clear in Greek as he had been in his own Egyptian. Thus Paul says that worldly wisdom is madness before God,²⁸ since those who profess this wisdom make wicked use of it. Ultimately, the pleasure the Greeks took in the superficial beauty and sound of their language kept them from being able to express the essence of Egyptian texts. This is the reason for Aesculapius/Asclepius's warning to King Ammon. He does not mean that the Greeks should not know God; rather he sees that they are incapable of making divine things known with their language.

The Hermetic text, Candale concludes, had originally been written in Egyptian, a language very close to Syriac and other Oriental languages. Thus he often felt driven in his commentary to interpret his Greek text in the light of Syriac. For, as he reasoned, the original Egyptian could have been altered in its translation into Greek, despite the fact that, as many think, Mercury himself had composed the translation. And even though the Egyptian original no longer exists, it is clear that the Greek text was the work of a consummately skilled ancient translator, one who expressed its highly secret doctrines with both stylistic elegance and amazing clarity.

Candale provides us in his commentary with various examples of the difficulties caused by the translation from Egyptian into Greek. In *CH* IV. 9 (p. 265) Mercury differentiates between 'immortal' and 'mortal' by eliminating one letter (at issue is the difference between *athanatos* and *thnetos*). This linguistic peculiarity (the use of the *alpha* privative) could cause one to think that the treatise's phrase did not come from Egyptian, but that it was actually written in Greek. It is necessary to keep in mind, though, Candale observes, that the concept of privation has long been expressed in many languages by means of a privative particle appended as a prefix, as can be seen generally in Greek, Latin, and French. The same happens in Oriental languages, which suggests that it was also the case in Egyptian, which is related to them. When interpreting the text of *CH* IX. 8, where it is said that the world is an ornament, Candale notes (p. 316) that in Greek, Latin, and Syriac, the latter of which is very closely related to Hebrew, terms for 'ornament' are always

²⁷ Since Mercury, as Candale says (in accord with many others), was more ancient than Moses.

²⁸ See I Corinthians 1. 25.

used to indicate the world, and this also applies to Egyptian.²⁹ On p. 551 Candale discusses the meaning of 'coessential', expressed by the Greek term *synousiastikos*. He interprets *ousia* as 'essence' and *synousia* as 'assemblage of essences'. Hence the meaning of 'coessential'. The ancient Greeks did not possess true understanding of essence, which pertains only to the Lord God (whom they did not know), and thus they could not have known the meaning of 'coessential'. It can therefore be assumed that Mercury used this word as a translation from the Egyptian. Regarding the passage 'There is a great difference between the similar and the dissimilar' (*CH* IV. 9, pp. 181–82), Candale observes that this mode of speaking derives from the translation into Greek from Egyptian, which in turn came from Syriac, which expresses comparisons in this way.

Hieroglyphics

According to Candale, Mercury lived at a time in which writing did not yet exist, and thus he was the first to invent the method of arranging letters and syllables, which we call 'writing', to express the secret and the object of his thought. Candale, then, also identifies Hermes/Mercury with Thoth, to whom the invention of writing had been attributed ever since Plato.³⁰ Writing, he continues, originally consisted of those letters that we call 'hieroglyphics'. In their exterior and visible form they represented paintings of creatures or things, animals, plants, etc. But this kind of writing was absolutely unsuited to the expression of ideas. Mercury himself makes this difficulty clear when, wanting to attribute to a subject the power of acting and causing, he says (*CH* I. 9) that it possesses the 'power of the two sexes', or is 'male and female', or, regarding God himself — who produces his holy Word, the Holy Spirit, on his own — that God has the 'power of the two sexes', that is, the power of acting. Taken literally, this statement would be absurd. And again, wanting to affirm that God's virtues are infinite, Mercury says (*CH* I. 4) that they take on a watery nature, because what is watery cannot be contained within any boundaries. When, instead, he wants to teach that sin fights man in his conscience, he says that it fights in the darkness, since it remains hidden and unobserved and

²⁹ Obviously such an interpretation could not have been accepted by the great philologist Isaac Casaubon, according to whom all these linguistic observations pertain to late Greek. Examples of this are the etymologies of *athanatos*, in treatise XIII, of *basileus* (*CH* XVIII. 16), and of *kosmos* (*CH* IX. 8), which are in no way Egyptian words. See below, p. 284.

³⁰ See *Phaedr.* 274b.

has produced a darkness in the soul. Nature opposes the law of fate to which matter is subject, and it finds remedies for it, for example those that are indicated by hieroglyphics (p. 18). Again, when the Hermetic text says (*CH* X. 8) that souls regress and return to the condition of reptiles, the reptile must be understood allegorically. It stands for the lowest level and state to which the soul can sink. This mode of speaking derives from the art of hieroglyphics, in which the body of the snake was believed to be the heaviest (pp. 360, 418–19). On p. 484 Candale explains the expression ‘image of the tomb’, found in *CH* XI. 21:³¹ it is a hieroglyphic expression, he says, and to understand it one must remember that the ancients used the term ‘heart’ to designate the secret and hidden things in man. Thus they thought of the heart as something closed, and it is therefore signified by a closed tomb. Traces of this kind of language could still be found in the times of Christ (this is probably a reference to the expression ‘whitewashed tombs’, said of the Pharisees).

Apuleius’s Unreliability

Faivre has noted that Candale has a reason for dealing exclusively with the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum*.³² Only the *Corpus*, according to Candale, is an authentic work of Mercury, who translated it personally from Egyptian. Once this has been established in his mind, it is clear that the other Hermetic texts cannot have the same status as the *Pimander*. This is especially the case for the *Asclepius*, which, although it had been central to the Latin Hermetic tradition from the fourth century to Ficino, was now considered a work of Apuleius with the title, ever since Ficino’s edition at least, of *De voluntate Dei*. For Candale, the *Asclepius* forms no part at all of Hermes’ teaching. It is a worthless work of idolatry and paganism, as can be seen in its doctrine of the statues of gods (chaps 23, 27), which had been debated ever since Ficino’s day. In his introduction, Candale disputes that the *Asclepius* had simply been translated from a Greek exemplar, and he argues that Apuleius, being a pagan, had inserted into it certain doctrines foreign to Mercury that taint the latter with idolatry. In addition, Apuleius destroyed the Greek

³¹ This problem arose for Candale because he read, with Turnebus, ‘indeed, there is nothing that does not belong to the image of the tomb’. Nock and Festugière, however, follow the text of Cyril of Alexandria (*Contra Iul.* II. 52), which is notably different and makes no mention of a ‘tomb.’

³² *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. by Hanegraaff, in collaboration with Faivre, van den Broek, and Brach, I, 377.

exemplar that he had used so that no one could notice his falsification.³³ Moreover, he was not only a pagan but had committed countless crimes, and so it should be no surprise that the reputation of so great a man as Mercury was harmed by the work of such a wretch. As a result, Candale thinks it wise not to publish the *Asclepius*, which is pocked by idolatry, and thus he becomes perhaps the first to move Hermetic doctrine's centre of gravity to the Greek tradition.

The same indictment of Apuleius is repeated in greater detail in the preface to the commentary.³⁴ According to Candale, even before the Greek treatises were brought to Europe by Fra Leonardo da Pistoia (a fact which he knew from Ficino), another work arrived in which various points of Mercury's thought can be seen. It is called 'the will of God' (i.e. *De voluntate Dei*, the title Ficino gave to the *Asclepius*) and was translated into Latin by Apuleius. But this translation bears no trace of the original Greek or Egyptian. And whereas in the *Pimander* we see that Mercury was a true precursor to Christianity and a herald of its chief points, in the treatise on God's will these doctrines are neglected or expounded obscurely. We have seen, Candale continues, both on the basis of the common opinion of the learned and in the Hermetic writings themselves, that Apuleius's translation is highly suspect, given that no Greek or Egyptian text is extant to check it against. Furthermore, Augustine received a letter from Marcellinus (*epist.* 4, *ad Deogratias, quaestio* 6) informing him that Apuleius had been a magician. Augustine himself wrote elsewhere that Apuleius had used various magic spells to obtain wealth, and finally that he had composed an oration against the inhabitants of Cous in order to have a statue erected to himself.³⁵ So, all this evidence shows us that Apuleius was guilty enough to have easily wanted to associate the name of that good philosopher (i.e. Mercury) with the imperfection of idolatry (by which he himself was so utterly ruled), falsifying his version of the treatise on the will of God. What is more, Apuleius probably destroyed the Greek exemplar not only to support his imposture but

³³ Candale does not think of the *Asclepius* as a translation of the *Logos teleios*; he appears not to have known Lactantius, who provided some quotations of the Greek original and, consequently, proof that the *Asclepius* was a translation.

³⁴ And it is found again on p. 124.

³⁵ This is the statue of himself that Apuleius wanted to have erected and that was found in Oea. Candale takes his information from Augustine, *epistula* 138. 19, where, according to Goldbacher's apparatus criticus at least, ancient editors read *Coenses* for *Oeenses* (thus 'the inhabitants of Cous' is not Candale's error); on this topic, see C. Moreschini, 'Sulla fama di Apuleio nella tarda antichità', in *Romanitas et Christianitas: Studia Iano Henrico Waszink oblata*, ed. by W. den Boer and others (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1973), pp. 243–48.

also to hide his ignorance of the Greek language, which is revealed in his translation of certain treatises of Aristotle: those who know Greek in our times find them to be full of errors.³⁶ The *Asclepius*, then, is foreign to Hermes' doctrine and is stained with the baseness of Apuleius, an individual possessed by an evil spirit. Augustine, who had not seen the *Pimander* but only the *Asclepius*, is right when he says, referring to the treatise corrupted by Apuleius, 'if it truly is how it has been transmitted in our language',³⁷ as if doubting the Latin translator's fidelity to the Greek original. The treatise translated by Apuleius will thus be ignored until the original, may it please God, is recovered, and the *Pimander* alone, which is an authentic work, will be considered.

Candale explains the nature of Apuleius's idolatry later in the commentary (p. 124): Mercury demonstrates his reverence for God by declaring that all other gods are superstitions and idolatry; he does not attribute a divine nature to them, as some have done on the basis of the *Asclepius*, which was so poorly translated by Apuleius. Here, too, Candale refers to the *Asclepius*'s 'chief crime', that is, its doctrine that man can 'create gods'. He understands that passage to mean the creation of statues of demons, to whom (according to Apuleius's 'disfigured' text) we owe worship; it is therefore idolatrous. This doctrine had caused notable embarrassment for Italian Hermetists since Ficino's day (see pp. 146–51); if they had accepted the *Asclepius*'s doctrine without reservation, then they would have been forced to admit that Trismegistus was an idolater.

Trismegistus's Chronology

In the preface to the text, Candale notes that many things are said about Mercury Trismegistus's social status and the age in which he lived, and that there are also disputes among the ancients regarding this oldest of figures. Recently, he continues, Ioannes Functius (John Funk) claimed in his *Chronologia* that Mercury flourished twenty-one years before Moses gave the Law to the Jews in the desert, and thus in the year when Israel left Egypt. This is difficult to accept, considering that the ancients thought Mercury was called Trismegistus because, according to the ancient customs of the Egyptians, he was successively a most excellent philosopher, priest,

³⁶ This is probably a reference to another pseudo-Apuleian work, the *De interpretatione*, which at the time was considered authentic. It would be worthwhile to investigate the issue of this treatise's diffusion in sixteenth-century philosophical culture.

³⁷ Augustine, *De civ. Dei* VIII. 23.

and then king, on which account he was called 'thrice great'.³⁸ It is said that Mercury discovered the origins of letters, that is, of writing. Scholars of Antiquity claim that several Mercuries existed, and it is not clear which of these was Trismegistus. He himself, however, says he was born of Coelus³⁹ and Saturn (*CH* X. 5), and the ancients say that the Egyptians called him Thoth. Here a problem arises: the *Corpus Hermeticum* has a character named Tat, who however is not Hermes, as he would be if Thoth had truly been Hermes' name; on the contrary, Tat is Hermes' son. Candale's explanation is remarkably convoluted. When Mercury, the father, wrote to his son, he called him Tat, in which his own name ('Thoth') was contained. The most important letters were not altered, and so he left a hint for posterity as to his own name. He omitted his true name on purpose, which in Greek was *Hermes* and in Latin *Mercurius*, so that his progeny would not erase the name that had been begun by him. This is no small proof of the fact that Mercury himself translated his work into Greek.⁴⁰ Indeed, it would have been difficult for a Greek to pass over in silence his true name of Mercury — *Hermes* — and to have called his son Tat by the father's Egyptian name, Thoth.

Therefore, Candale continues, this Mercury Trismegistus must be thought the progenitor, or at the least the second, of all the Mercuries that scholars have identified,⁴¹ considering that in the tenth treatise he says that he was the son not of Mercury but of Coelus and Saturn.⁴² Then all the things that are said about this

³⁸ This statement is also repeated on p. 683.

³⁹ The Greek *Ouranos* has thus been understood as a proper name and so has been made masculine in Latin. The masculine form *Coelus* for *coelum* exists in ancient Latin, too.

⁴⁰ The question is taken up again in the commentary to *CH* IV. 1, p. 144 as follows. Mercury begins to use the dialogue form in this chapter, something he had never done before. He dedicates that dialogue to his son Tat. We have learned from those who study Eastern languages that Mercury, called Hermes by the ancient Greeks, was called Thoth in Egyptian. And his ancestor, who was worshipped by the Egyptians as the god of eloquence (and who was also called Hermes by the Greeks), was similarly called Thoth by the Egyptians, on account of which the first month beginning with the autumnal equinox took the name of Thoth (information that Candale took from Cicero, *De nat. deor.* III. 22. 56). From Thoth the Greeks made Tat, thus imitating Eastern languages, which are so similar to one another that the difference between words often consists merely in changing the points that indicate vowels, whereas the consonants are always left the same.

⁴¹ According to the passage we have cited from Cicero, there were five individuals with the name of Hermes. Cicero's statement is taken up by Lactantius, *Div. instit.* I. 6. 2.

⁴² This information is partially corroborated by Cicero, *De nat. deor.* III. 22. 56, who says: 'there was one Mercury whose father was Caelus and whose mother was Dies' ('Mercurius unus Caelo patre Die matre natus').

great man would suit him better. Indeed, he could not have been the inventor of the letters of the alphabet if he had not come before Moses' time. Sacred Scripture attests that Moses had been an expert in all Egyptian doctrine from his youth,⁴³ and this would not have been possible if the letters of the alphabet had not already existed. Furthermore, Mercury could not have been king of the Egyptians if he had lived after the Pharaohs, nor could he have had the other titles of philosopher and priest. Since the histories narrate that others had ruled Egypt before and after Moses, it seems necessary that Trismegistus reigned before Moses. Otherwise Mercury could not have been the son of Saturn, who flourished in the times of Abram's great-grandfather Saruch.⁴⁴ Suidas attests that Mercury Trismegistus, an Egyptian wise man, flourished before Pharaoh, and that this Pharaoh was the king of the Egyptians who gave his name to the successive kings. Therefore, if Mercury came before the first Pharaoh, he clearly could not be more recent than the three patriarchs Abraham, Jacob, and Israel, since the kingdom of the Pharaohs was close to their times.

The same is repeated in the introduction to the commentary. The evidence shows that Mercury was more ancient than Moses. As he says in the tenth treatise, he was the descendant of Caelus and Saturn,⁴⁵ who were considered gods in ancient fables, as often happens to famous people.⁴⁶ It is to those times that hieroglyphics date. Others say something different, namely that there were four Mercuries and that the second is ours, son of Coelus and Saturn, whereas still others say that he is the last.⁴⁷ This uncertainty is the result of the great antiquity of the facts involved, which have been variously handed down and corrupted, writing being the only method

⁴³ Acts 7. 22.

⁴⁴ See Genesis 11. 22–26. As for the chronological correspondence between Saturn and Saruch, a study would be desirable on which chronology Candale followed (Eusebius? George Syncellus?).

⁴⁵ This is also repeated in the commentary, p. 340.

⁴⁶ By making him descend from Caelus and Saturn, Candale identifies Mercury with the first one on Cicero's list, whereas Cicero says that Mercury-Theuth is the fifth of this name.

⁴⁷ This is certainly Cicero, who in the passage so often referred to says that the son of *Coelus* and *Dies* is the first; the fifth and last, 'whom the residents of Pheneia worship, who is said to have killed Argos and on that account fled to Egypt and gave laws and letters to the Egyptians: him the Egyptians call Theuth, and they call the first month of the year by the same name' ('quem colunt Pheneatae, qui Argum dicitur interemisse ob eamque causam Aegyptum profugisse atque Aegyptiis leges et litteras tradidisse: hunc Aegyptii Theuth appellant, eodemque nomine anni primus mensis apud eos vocatur'). This last identification, more precise with its various details about Thoth, was the most widespread; Candale also mentioned the first Mercury spoken of by Cicero because Coelus is said to be his father, which was attested in *CH* X. 5, as has been seen.

mankind has for leaving its memory to posterity. It is possible that Mercury wrote more treatises, for it is said that he wrote one hundred treatises on the Empyrean gods, one hundred on the ethereal gods, and one thousand on the heavenly gods.⁴⁸

Trismegistus's Christian Inspiration

God's mode of revealing himself to Hermes was completely new. It was, according to Candale, a revelation proper. It is described at the beginning of the first treatise, in which Mercury recounts in the first person his own experience of the Mind of God appearing to him. The doctrines of the first treatise and of those that follow are, essentially, the first that were given to Mercury. They were then also revealed in the later treatises. Some are in the form of a dialogue and have a different setting (for example, treatise XIII reports an experience that takes place on a mountain). The revelation came in the waking state, but it made intelligible virtues arise in Mercury, as happened during God's revelation to Daniel or to St Paul on the road to Damascus. In the first treatise, as Candale explains later (p. 420), God, having instructed Mercury in a special way, illuminated him with the extraordinary vision of his 'exemplary excellence' (i.e. the world of the divine ideas), and he wanted him to understand the three divine subjects contained in a single essence and divinity, that is, the three Persons of the Trinity. When the Hermetic text says, 'Man learns everything else exactly' (*CH* X. 25, p. 417), it is referring to the things that Moses saw when God spoke to him on the mountain, and that Moses and Elijah saw during the transfiguration of the Lord, as spoken of in the Gospels. These things are the divine model containing all things. In the vision narrated in *CH* I. 1, the voice heard by Mercury — that of *Pimander*, Mind of divine Power — was that of God's holy Word, which had issued from the watery nature, generated and made by the eternal Father; its limbs are infinite virtues, powers, and intelligence (p. 7).

Mercury concludes the ninth treatise like a true Christian, confirming all his knowledge with faith in the true God. The knowledge of God was received by Paul when he was carried off to the third heaven, by Moses on the mountain, and by Mercury in his vision (pp. 322–23). That is why Mercury said that comprehending is believing, and, conversely, that not believing means not understanding (p. 325).

⁴⁸ These considerations on Mercury's antiquity are also repeated in *CH* XIII. 13, p. 611; on the existence of the several Mercuries, see X. 5, p. 340: the ancient fables, Candale notes, attribute untrue deeds to Mercury; such fables are inventions introduced by Satan to impede the true knowledge of God, so that instead of worshipping the true God, the supreme Good, men welcome idols.

It is amazing that God showed such grace to this Mercury, who lived before Moses, as to speak to him on familiar terms and to manifest more secrets to him than to anyone else — secrets that were later revealed by Christ and his Church. Indeed, God inspired Mercury directly, and his doctrine has all the characteristics of a revelation:

This little treatise on the knowledge of God, on the condition of man and his other works, called 'the Pimander' [...] is highly suited to the union of philosophy and Christianity, and that is how we have wished to explain it, showing how certain phrases of Holy Scripture agree with our Mercury, whose antiquity has made his ideas difficult for us to understand. These difficulties consist in a certain manner of speaking and in figurative thought, which are very difficult to translate into another language. Examples of this are also found in the way scripture expresses itself. (preface)

This is the principle on whose basis Candale then goes on to interpret the Hermetic writings and to resolve the difficulties that might otherwise have hindered him from demonstrating a direct correspondence between Hermetism and Sacred Scripture — a correspondence that stretches from the books of Moses to the letters of the apostles. Indeed, God showed Mercury such favour as to grant him the same instruction that was received by Moses, the prophets, and the apostles. This is demonstrated by his great learning and erudition. In the first chapter he teaches the creation of the world and all the creatures, the sin of man, and the restoration of his salvation. In chapter 13 (for us treatise XIII) he explains that the only way to be saved is through the holy Word, Son of God and man, author of regeneration, before whom no one was saved; this is the rebirth spoken of in John 3 and by Peter (1 Peter 1) (preface, A 2). God, in his goodness, wishes to speak to each person according to his capacity to understand him. And elsewhere: Mercury, called 'Trismegistus' by the Greeks, is one of those to whom God revealed himself. Moved by his mercy towards man, God infused his wisdom in Mercury. Therefore consistent agreement can be observed between his philosophy and scripture. Mercury's language and style display a philosophy much more profound than that of those who came after him (p. 1).⁴⁹ This interpretation of treatise XIII, understood as man's 'rebirth', agrees with that of modern scholarship.⁵⁰ Mercury, Candale says, was not

⁴⁹ It is also said on p. 522 that the good demon spoken of in *CH* XII. 8 is the Holy Spirit of God, full of all the efficacies, constantly producing countless effects, from whom Mercury received his wisdom in a revelation. This can be seen in the excellence of his ideas, so elevated and secret, which were accessible to no living man no matter how much effort and suffering he put into procuring his wisdom. But the good God, wishing to make this doctrine known to mankind, manifested it directly in a revelation given to one of his good servants, Mercury.

⁵⁰ See above, pp. 19–21.

only pleasing to God, but he was also a true Christian who sought his salvation and that of others with the same tools that were later given to Christians. Moreover, Christ has the power to make himself known even to those who came before he was manifested, as is written: 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever' (Hebrews 13. 8), and 'Abraham rejoiced to see my day' (John 8. 56). Consequently, Mercury's discourse in treatise XIII is incredible proof of his personal relationship with God. For God gave to him alone not only knowledge of the chief points of Christian doctrine (which God himself teaches us through Moses), but also clear understanding of the salvation sent to man through the Son of God made man, who was the author of regeneration, before which no one was saved. This doctrine of regeneration was an absolute novelty, introduced by Mercury. It was revealed neither to Moses nor to any other prophet before the coming of Christ and his apostles. And even if God's goodness had prompted him to reveal more to Moses than we know, it is no wonder that Moses did not say it publicly, considering that God told him what he ought to reveal and what not, and he did the same with Ezra. Mercury similarly advises his son to remain silent about his doctrines. It is thus amazing that God wished to teach this great philosopher, Mercury, not only the chief points of the Old Testament, but also the gift made by his Son to man, namely his salvation by means of rebirth or regeneration, about which no Old Testament writer spoke. The testimony and doctrine that Mercury offers us in this chapter (i.e. treatise) unmask the wrongs and impostures that have been perpetrated against him by some. They were unable to understand his doctrine properly, and therefore they considered it idolatry. (Is this an allusion to the controversies about the doctrine of 'making gods' that we have so often encountered?) In this they were influenced by a treatise on the will of God, translated from Greek into Latin by Apuleius (as was said above). Mercury, however, nurtured the true faith of St Peter and the Church of Jesus Christ (pp. 562–63).

On the basis of this conception of the unity of Hermetic and Christian revelation, the preface to the edition concludes with the wish that in the end there will be only one shepherd and only one flock. This is an allusion to a passage of the Gospel of John (10. 16) that was particularly dear to another great Hermetist of the Renaissance (although we do not know if Candale knew him), Ludovico Lazzarelli, who repeats it in his *Crater Hermetis*. This reference to John might support the interpretation, posited by some scholars, that Hermetism was motivated by an irenic project of pacification among all religions in an age of extremely harsh conflicts.⁵¹

⁵¹ On this issue, see J. Harrie, 'Duplessis-Mornay, Foix-Candale and the Hermetic Religion of the World', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 31 (1978), 499–514.

At the end of his commentary Candale summarizes his work in the following manner: we have explained, with this treatise on the knowledge of God and the condition of man, called *Pimander*, a portion of Mercury Trismegistus's doctrine. It is the root of his fame, both for the revelation that it pleased God to give him in treatises I and XIII, and for the doctrine that he divulged in his other treatises. Mercury is thus one of those who lived before the incarnation of Christ and were nevertheless saved, those referred to in Hebrews 11, that is, the holy Fathers who were promised the salvation that was later brought by Christ. Thanks to their deep faith, they saw him long before his incarnation, awaiting with their faith and hope the promises of God.

Christianity and Pagan Philosophy

Divine revelation is the culmination of human knowledge. God is the first, Candale observes in the preface to his commentary (A 4); then there is Nature, together with the heavenly powers and *fatum*, or fatal destiny. All these have been appointed to the service of God and the rule of his creations. Once man has understood material things, he is brought by the true philosophy to know their first cause. His true reasoning therefore consists in leading his mind, through the knowledge and contemplation of visible things, to know the supreme good. All the good philosophers devoted their studies to this supreme good, although not all reached it. The best of them was a most ancient Egyptian, called Mercury Trismegistus, who was so favoured by God that no other philosopher is now remembered who received such profound knowledge and a personal revelation of God's essences and secrets. And this despite the fact that so many of his writings have been lost, such that what has come down to us is quite a small part, a thousandth even, of what he wrote on theology.

It was not without reason that Mercury's revelation was only partially known. The advisability of hiding a sublime doctrine from mankind required it. Mercury lived among idolaters in a time before all scripture, and if he had begun to talk about a man who was the Son of God and the author of eternal salvation through rebirth, he surely would have been considered a charlatan, as happened to Christ, and a sower of false words, as happened to Paul in Athens. Mercury therefore saw that, in light of the sad state of mankind, if he had sought to herald salvation, he would have exposed his person and his life to danger, and he would have died fruitlessly, without utility for the service of God. All the truths taught by Mercury were manifested two thousand years later through Jesus Christ, and even he had a very

difficult time getting his doctrine accepted — not only by the Egyptians but by the very people of God. Thus Mercury, despite his integrity and the fact that he would not have feared risking his life to serve God, seeing that his death would have served no purpose, wisely neither revealed nor announced the doctrine of regeneration (A 4). But we, having witnessed Mercury's religion and trustworthiness, do not hesitate to interpret it in a spirit entirely in accord with that of Christ, the apostles, and the holy Catholic Church (pp. 489–90).

Some thought that Mercury knew God as other philosophers had, that is, by means of the knowledge of natural things, but that he did not glorify him as the true God. In saying this, however, such people do great wrong, both to him and to themselves. For in Mercury can be found all Christian doctrines, such as the existence of the creator-God, as well as that of the Word, the Son of God and man, the bringer of regeneration, without which no one can be saved or recover holy Mind, which must be obtained through immersion in baptism. Mercury speaks of a third Person, whom he calls 'second Mind, God of fire and of the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Word, the Son who performs all divine actions' (p. 92). He never divides the essence and the divinity of the Three, who are one and whose union is life. In the *Pimander*, Mercury explains (according to the usage of his times) the resurrection of bodies and the expectation of eternal life, and above all that every prayer must be offered to God through the Word his Son, because he alone is the author of salvation.

Once it has been ascertained that Christian and Hermetic revelation have their origin in the same source, Candale manages to find agreement not only between Mercury and Christ, but also between Mercury and the apostles. Here are a few examples of his interpretation.

The Hermetic text (*CH* XIII. 1, pp. 563–65) says that Mercury descended from the mountain, where he had taught men what the will of God was. The mountain is the place suited to communication with God, as shown by the examples of Elijah on Mount Carmel (and Elisha, who was with him), of Moses on Sinai, and of Christ on Mount Olivet.⁵² Tat had prepared himself so well to receive the regeneration that Mercury teaches that, as a good moral philosopher, although not yet a Christian, he had already detached himself from bodily things. Then, after he purified himself, he asked his father Mercury to reveal to him the secret of regeneration. For he had not realized that the most important knowledge was already in himself, thanks to the Spirit of God that was in him. Tat's question to Trismegistus

⁵² See Luke 21. 37.

corresponds to the one Nicodemus posed to Christ: how can a man, once born, be reborn? Both understand the rebirth as a material rebirth.⁵³

The agreement between the instruction and doctrine given by God to Mercury and those given by Christ to the apostles is amazing. Of essential importance is the agreement regarding salvation. Christ speaks of the knowledge of God and explains that man's salvation consists in it; Mercury considered the doctrine of God's Son made man to be part of the knowledge necessary to man, as is said in *CH* XI. 5. True faith and vivifying belief are the result of knowledge and understanding, as is affirmed by Mercury (*CH* IX. 10, p. 325) and as is attested by Christ, when he says: 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent' (John 17. 3).⁵⁴

When speaking to the people, Mercury taught them, openly or secretly, the remedies that would be brought by Christ, to show that mankind is able to participate in immortality. And although he did not announce Christ in the precise terms of Christianity (which came much later), nevertheless he announces the same Christ, human son of God, author of regeneration, without which salvation is impossible. He calls him 'Son of God the Word', from whom, together with the Father, proceeded the second Mind, the Holy Spirit of omnipotent God (p. 92). Another aspect of this amazing agreement is the correspondence between *CH* XI. 20–21 and the parable of the talents, with which Christ declares his desire for us to attentively and diligently use the knowledge and understanding he has wished to give us (p. 479).

The correspondence between Mercury's doctrine and that of Paul is propounded on p. 53. Paul imagined that in man existed two men in opposition to one another, one spiritual or intelligible, the other bodily or sensible. Mercury calls them 'essential man' and 'material man', Paul 'interior man' and 'exterior man' (man being made up of essence and matter). Moreover, Paul is in agreement with what Mercury says to the philosophers when he describes how man participates in God: 'We live and move and have our being' in God, that God whom the philosophers

⁵³ John 3. 4. On this matter and in many others thrice-great Mercury was a forerunner of Christ, who said to Nicodemus that whoever is not reborn cannot see the kingdom of heaven. Mercury says that before regeneration no one is saved, i.e. whoever is not reborn cannot be saved, and Peter says so, too (Candale's note in the margin). Mercury says this in treatises IX and X (more precisely, *CH* X. 15, p. 377).

⁵⁴ Candale thus succeeds in understanding the full gnostic and redemptive meaning of this affirmation of Christ, reference to which has already been made above, pp. 16–17.

call 'unknown', and, above all, 'we men are his progeny' (Acts 17. 28).⁵⁵ For this reason Mercury could not have been mistaken when he said that the place where everything moves is incorporeal, since it is God (*CH* II. 8, p. 117).

Finally, the apostle Peter's teaching also accords with Mercury's (pp. 254, 261).

Plato and Mercury

The belief that the greatest prophet and herald of Christian truth agreed with the greatest pagan thinker arose together with Ficino's rediscovery of Plato, as was seen above. It was also nurtured by the great similarity between certain Hermetic and Platonic doctrines, although the relationship between them was the exact opposite of what scholars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries hypothesized. That is, they believed that Plato learned from Mercury (at some point during his travels in Egypt), whereas in fact some aspects of Hermetic theosophy were derived from Platonic philosophy. Thus Candale maintains in the preface to his commentary that all the best philosophers — Pythagoreans, Platonists, Aristotelians, and others — took the most beautiful part of their teaching from Mercury. Nevertheless, Mercury was better than them, for although they all knew God through the works of nature, he glorified him and truly knew him as God.⁵⁶

This point of contact between Plato and Mercury receives fuller treatment on pp. 269–70, where the Hermetic text (*CH* VII. 2) prompts Candale to consider the theme of man as a microcosm. As Mercury says in the passage in question, the world was honoured with the divine virtues and, on account of the perfection

⁵⁵ It must be emphasized that Candale saw the profound significance of Paul's speech on the Areopagus and the idea of the 'unknown God'. Let it suffice on this point to cite the classic monograph of E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1913), with a recent and ample critical update by Ch. O. Tommasi: *Dio ignoto: Ricerche sulla storia della forma del discorso religioso* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2002).

⁵⁶ Here Candale proposes a new etymology of the term 'philosophy', which was commonly understood, according to the standard Pythagorean and Ciceronian interpretation, as 'love of wisdom'. 'From this we can understand,' Candale counters, 'that true philosophy, which depends only on knowing the works of God through his law of nature, is absolutely joined with his will and is not incompatible with it, as many have thought, having not yet understood that philosophy takes its name from "the wisdom of love". It is the Wisdom of the Father, and it is the holy Word, by means of whom and the Holy Spirit all beings were created and are ruled. It is no wonder, then, if a true philosopher, beginning from the knowledge of created things, should arrive at the knowledge of this first cause. This is what Mercury did, and therefore this tradition of philosophy conforms to the will of God, since it is nothing other than the knowledge of his deeds and his glory.'

placed in it, was also worthy of containing in itself the divine animal that is man. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand in what sense the world, which is full of so many wonderful things, is said to have been made in the image of the great and first God. For the same reason man can be called the microcosm, as Plato explained in the *Timaeus*. It is certain, then, that on this point Plato took his doctrine from Mercury while in Egypt learning philosophy.⁵⁷ As a result Plato speaks of the ideas after the manner of Mercury, often using the same phrases and the same comparisons. For this reason, John, too, says that God loved the world so dearly that he sent his Son so that no one would perish (3. 16). That is, he loved not the world but this little world, the microcosm, because it contains his image, man. Candale soon (p. 273) returns to the relationship between model and copy, macrocosm and microcosm. Plato learned about the ideas contained in the *Timaeus* at the school of Mercury when he was in Egypt. Plato (in the *Timaeus* and other treatises) and many other Greek philosophers took their subtlest knowledge from Mercury, who lived before all of them and had no master other than the holy Mind or Spirit of God (p. 522).

Candale's Christian Hermetism

The discovery of Foix-Candale's thought is owed above all to the studies of Wouter Hanegraaff and Antoine Faivre. The above-mentioned dissertation by Harrie is valuable on the historical level, as its author has succeeded in collecting a great quantity of material from documentary and archival sources, but its investigation of Candale's ideas is less incisive. We would thus like to elaborate upon his Christian interpretation of Hermetism.

God

God is *authentēs*, an actual albeit rare word in Greek, interpreted as 'qui est estand de soy' (*CH* II. 2, p. 102 marg.), 'qui est de par soy' (I. 1, pp. 2–3). *Authentia* seems to be a neologism of the Hermetic author. Earlier, Ficino had interpreted *authentia* as 'God's power', and for Candale *authentia* is the power of the being of the divine

⁵⁷ This notion was very widely diffused in the culture of the Imperial Age, from Apuleius to the Christians. Attestations of it are countless.

Mind (*authentias nous*).⁵⁸ This meaning is commonly accepted.⁵⁹ Pimander is the Mind of God, and thus he is 'holy'. Through him God demonstrates to Mercury that there is nothing faster or more powerful than human understanding and mind (XV. 10, p. 674, which refers to XI. 19 in the margin). The holy Word, the Father, and the Mind are not separate but rather are the very conjunction of life (I. 6, p. 11). The procession of the Holy Spirit is described in I. 9, p. 15, according to which the Spirit proceeds from the Father and receives from the Son (cf. John 16. 14). The divine Mind is 'abondant aux deux sexes' (i.e. *arrhenothelys*). The Holy Spirit is lord and ruler of all intelligible realities.

Candale's chief aim is to highlight the identity (which had already been supposed by numerous ancient Christian texts) between the Word and the Spirit. In this way (he believes), the presence of God — that is, the Spirit — in the world and in man can be better seen through the two Persons. The holy Word Son of God, through whom the Holy Spirit was communicated to us, is thus the same thing as the Holy Spirit. They are of the same essence, and the one is the image of the other (*CH* XII. 14, p. 539). Pimander, then, is Mind, that is to say he is the divine Mind, or Holy Spirit of the supreme Good, that is, of omnipotent God, source of all essences (XIII. 14, p. 614). Or, vice versa, the Holy Spirit is the first mind (X. 17, p. 385).

CH XII. 21 speaks of the parts of God. They must be properly understood through their effects: they are life, immortality (by which God shows the excellence and infinity of his operations and essences), the Spirit (by which God causes movements and impulses in his creatures), fatal Necessity (by which matter is governed and ordered according to the divine will), Providence and Nature (the law and universal disposition of the order that it pleased the creator to introduce into the world, through which all things are directed and regulated), the Soul (through which the universe is regulated in its entirety and in all its parts, and through which the divine animal, supplied with the Holy Spirit, is ruled and governed, albeit under his own free will), and Mind, Holy Spirit of God, through which perfection is continually given to man (p. 557).

God's Virtues

God is omnipresent, not personally, but through his virtues or powers, which are found in the world. They are infinite and bear God's influence over the

⁵⁸ Scarpi observes that this word is used by John Chrysostom, *Homilies to St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy*, PG, 51, col. 617C and that the Latin translation of Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* I. 24. 1 gives *summa potestas* as the equivalent of *authentia*.

⁵⁹ Casaubon interprets *authentia* in the same way: 'hoc est, suprema potestas'; see below, p. 279.

material world and man. The Logos is the holy Word of God, generated and made by the eternal Father, all of whose parts are infinite virtues, powers, and understanding (p. 6). 'The holy Word that was moved over this watery and unbounded nature' is the omnipotence of the infinite virtues and powers of God, which the holy Word commanded and of which he disposed at his pleasure. Through the holy Word were produced the globe and the mass, the latter of which the ancients called 'chaos' (*CH* I. 5, p. 8; I. 8, p. 14). God is continually operating without passion through his holy Word, that is, the Holy Spirit, and he employs the essences and the virtues that have issued from himself (VI. 2, p. 229).⁶⁰ Each of the infinite essences, virtues, and actions of God comes from him without any intermediary (II. 2, p. 102).

Candale's French translation of *CH* II. 8 (= II. 14 Nock-Festugière), p. 114, is 'Qu'est-ce incorporel, ô Mercure? C'est pensée raison etc.' 'Pensée raison' is interpreted as '*la sainte* pensée raison'. Candale thus seeks to connect Hermes' statement with the *logos* spoken of by John (1. 1), which is in God: God was this Reason-mind and comprehended all things despite being separate from every body. St Paul encapsulates the whole of the law in the word 'love'. Love preserves all essences, and it issues from God's virtue, which preserves all things in the holy Word and in Reason. The same Greek word expresses both Word and Reason. God is therefore Word, Reason, and love, and he preserves all things (p. 116).

All created and eternal things have their commencement in God, who is Mind, Nature, and Matter. This means that eternal things, which are themselves divine essences, have their beginning in God. Their beginning is God's Wisdom, his Son, who responded to the questions of the Jews by saying, 'I am the *arche*', that is, the beginning (John 8. 3).⁶¹ Thus the commencement that continues in every intelligible or animate being is Jesus Christ, the commencement of God's creation, who came forth from the thought of God. Christ is the holy Word, founder of nature and divine law, thanks to which all creatures live in their actions and operations, according to the order and natural law that God assigned to each one individually (III. 1, p. 133).

⁶⁰ This might be a reference to Christ's healing of the woman who had suffered from bleeding for twelve years; when she touched his clothes, Christ sensed that 'virtue [i.e. power] had gone out of him' (Mark 5. 30).

⁶¹ This is not the proper meaning of the expression. Actually Christ's words must be understood differently: the *archen* of the Greek text is an adverb meaning 'this very thing' that I was now saying to you.

Operations of the Word

These 'operations' are the *energeiai* that extend to all human knowledge. The efficacies of all the knowledge of the arts and sciences are rays of God; the operations of nature are rays of the world; the operations carried out by the arts and sciences are rays of man (*CH* X. 23, p. 405). The essence of God, whose task is to produce effects, is nothing other than energy, that is, divine virtue and efficacy, capable of acting and operating. And in this context this virtue is called 'demon', on account of its essence. The 'good demon' spoken of by Hermes in this passage is an expression indicating the Spirit of God, as man refers to spiritual creatures as 'demons' and 'angels' indifferently (pp. 405–06). As noted in the margin of p. 406, it will be demonstrated in *XVI. 10* that the demon's essence is nothing other than *energeia*, which is not — Candale observes — precisely 'effect', although translators from Greek confuse the two terms, often understanding potency, action, and effect as the same thing. In this action or operation there is no difference between the holy Mind and the Spirit of God.

Creation

Creation, as explained by Candale, happens in accord with the Platonic and Christian tradition. The intelligible world (i.e. the world of the ideas) and matter exist, and with matter God creates. Candale, however, does not seem explicitly to affirm a *creatio ex nihilo*.

The Intelligible World

The world (*kosmos*) was created from chaos and, as the word indicates, is an 'ornament'. It was created on the model of the intelligible world, which is a perfect ornament (*CH* I. 8, pp. 13–14). Divine will, accompanied by the holy Word, contemplated the true model of the first, ancient 'figure', which cannot be fully comprehended by mortal man. This model, or ancient figure, is that which from its own essences produced the globe and the mass, or chaos. Out of it came forth the four elements, the infinite principles of all matter, which hence are younger than the divine model from which they spring. This was demonstrated to Mercury (who was terrified by Poimandres)⁶² and to Moses on the mountain.⁶³ In this model, all

⁶² Described in *CH* I, on which Candale is commenting here.

⁶³ See the description in Exodus 25–26, which had been used ever since Philo's time for interpretations of the intelligible world. Candale also speaks of it in *CH* VIII. 4, p. 273.

future things are eternally represented to the mind just as they will one day exist. This model was also shown to David and Solomon for the construction of the temple.⁶⁴ It is the intelligible world, which is composed of the virtues and powers of God, which in turn are then entrusted to the heavens, the stars, and created beings, so that they can perform the actions that have been entrusted to them wherever it pleases their creator (I. 9, p. 16). These virtues and powers make the intelligible world the most beautiful ornament that God has given to the sensible world.

The model of the world corresponds to Plato's world of the ideas, described in the *Timaeus*. Plato learned this doctrine from Mercury while in Egypt. The ideas are the designs, placed in this divine model of divine understanding and mind, of all the external effects that must be produced by God's essences and principles in the creation of the world and its contents. It was shown to Moses in the pattern he contemplated while on the mountain (Exodus 25 and 26) and when he had to make the priestly tent and raiment. Having seen the beauty of this ornament (or world, however it might be) in the model, that is, in the divine concept and idea, God's will together with his holy Word imitated it, putting into effect with its own principles and with simple seeds⁶⁵ that which the divine idea or design had projected. From this doctrine of the model of the ideas Plato took only the ideas related to the creation of the living soul, and he divided them into four parts. The first idea was that of the seed of animate beings and heavenly bodies, the second that of aerial bodies, the third of fish, the fourth of earthly animals (VIII. 4, p. 273).

The model for the creation of the world was found in God. The ideas represent and depict all the things that were and ever will be made, and they are situated eternally in God, eternal model of all things, who carries in himself all manner of ideas and figurative representations. The being of all things had its beginning from the ideas, because they exist eternally in the divine model. No lie can penetrate it; in it exist all truthful essences. When Christ says that 'before Abraham was, I am' (John 8. 58), he is talking about himself; for at that time he was living in a mortal body, not in the Logos which exists eternally in God. But since he existed eternally in the divine idea or model or mind, as Paul also says (1 Corinthians 1. 24), he was known even before the world, although he was manifested to us only in the last centuries. This means that it is not the manifestation of a thing's body to the senses that gives

⁶⁴ 1 Kings 5–6.

⁶⁵ The term is not clear. I think Candale means to employ the Stoic idea of *logos spermatikos*, understood after the manner of Christian apologetics and Clement of Alexandria to mean that the *spermata* ('the seeds', i.e. the origin) of the world are a part of the divine Logos.

it being, but rather the form that has been given to the body — as the philosophers (even pagans ones) have written (XVI. 14, pp. 740–41).

Matter

Matter was not pre-existent in itself. Rather it existed in the divine idea or model, or in chaos, without any order, still confused, because it had not yet been actuated and divided into the four elementary bodies. Being in chaos and not being shaped or put together in bodies, it was incorporeal. That is why Mercury says that matter, when it was incorporeal, was confused and disordered, without shape or qualities (*CH* VIII. 3, pp. 272–74). Matter is used in the formation of creatures, and after the cycle of growth and diminution it returns to the dissolution which we call 'death', and thus to a confusion similar to that which it had in the original chaos (VIII. 4, p. 276). Every creature of God is a good work, but since the form pressed into matter constitutes a subject and shares in both perfection and imperfection, it follows that, just as the part belonging to God — the form — is good, thus the part belonging to matter is evil (IX. 5, p. 306).

Matter is separate from God, who is the one and only good and the one and only perfection. Thus matter is evil and imperfection. This is the reason why all essences that have participated in matter have lost the perfect good and have found evil and imperfection, like a rough and confused mass (VI. 2, p. 227).

The Sensible World

Interest in and admiration for the sensible world are characteristic of the Hermetic and Christian traditions. The divine will sees the great beauty of the world in the holy model (i.e. in the model lodged in the Mind of God) and imitates it, and that is how the material world began. These principles of the divine will, which acted in concert with the Word, are the beginnings from which all material things were created. As the book of Wisdom says (chap. 11), they are the true principles and the true seeds of all creatures. The holy Word is accompanied by the Father in all its operations (John 14. 10–11).⁶⁶ As a result, all the principles and all the material elements come from simple essences, from the seeds and the principles of the holy Word, which complies with the will of God (*CH* VIII. 4).

The holy Word had the task of dividing and differentiating the great Chaos into particular elements, consolidating them and giving each one its own body. They still had something of intelligible nature, since they had been recently made

⁶⁶ The reference to Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* IV. 37 is false (p. 272).

and created as bodies from invisible things. That is what Paul says (Hebrews 11. 3), namely that through faith we believe that the ages were formed by the Word of God, so that visible things were made from invisible ones (III. 1, p. 134).

God distributes his infinite virtues and powers to his immortal creatures to serve, aid, and guide mortals. They accompany the ornament, which is the intelligible world ('world' meaning 'ornament' in both Greek and Latin). After the intelligible world comes the sensible world. It, too, is beautiful, although not in a primary way, and it contains material things and actions (IV. 2, p. 147). The intelligible world contains virtues and powers, the sensible world matter and operations.

Mercury calls the world 'son of God', since it was created and generated by God, by his intelligible and invisible essences, in the same way as a man generates a son from his essence (X. 14, p. 376, end of chapter). All essences are divine, and therefore there is no being except in God. Paul calls the forms 'good' (1 Timothy 4. 4)⁶⁷ because form comes from the perfect Good (VI. 2, p. 227). God puts his virtues into matter, and through them it carries out its work and action. These virtues come from God (VI. 2, pp. 227–28), and so they are not in any way imperfect or subject to passion.

The world is good, not purely and simply good, and not on account of any intrinsic perfection, but thanks to its participation and communion with the divine virtues, which are perfectly good. Matter's vice and imperfection continually produce excrement and superfluity in the world, and thus the world is not good in these parts. As a result man is in danger of devoting himself too much to the things of the world, even though it is not his purpose to entrust himself to material things (VI. 2, p. 229).

In IX. 8 Mercury says that God is the father of the world. He produces the world by himself, and as a result the world is father, that is, creator, of the things that are in the world, thanks to the same divine virtues that have been put into it to guide, govern, and produce all created things. Thus the world is the son of God, not in its various material things, but in its virtues or forms. The world was made intelligible by its reception of divine virtues, that is, by receiving God into itself. Being God's instrument for executing his commands and his will, it received into itself the actions and virtues given by God. This is the source of its excellence, which makes the world an 'ornament'. Its beauty is increased by the fact that, having received man, it received the one which contains him, that is, the Holy Spirit, image of God, who is in man and contains the world and that which is in it (pp. 315–17).

⁶⁷ Actually, the passage of Paul simply says that 'everything created by God is good'. Candale is obviously forcing the interpretation here.

In VIII. 1 the Hermetic text speaks of a 'second god'. This must not be taken literally. In scripture men are sometimes called 'gods'.⁶⁸ Mercury calls the heavenly bodies 'gods' because they possess the command of God as their defining characteristic. According to Mercury, then, the world is the second god because it more than any other creature has God's authority and virtues. Moreover, it contains all the creatures and is composed of all God's virtues, which are its parts. Mercury also calls the world an 'animal' (i.e. 'living being'), since it is full of life in all its parts, and 'immortal' since it is composed of units and parts that, all being derived from divine essences, cannot be destroyed or reduced to nothing. It is therefore impossible, if the world is the second god, for any part or unit of that truly great composition to be destroyed; it will remain immortal (p. 266). The world was made in the image of God, for God put his virtues and powers into the creatures that compose the world. To the heavenly, immortal bodies he gave his actions, powers, and virtues, these being necessary for matter to be treated so that it can produce generations, productions, corruptions, changes, renewals, etc. Creatures are made all the time, and the work of this great Craftsman never ceases. No thing can be found that is useless on account of not having received his graces and goodness. The world was honoured with divine virtues and also made worthy of containing in itself the divine animal, man. And on account of the perfection with which it was endowed, it is therefore not difficult to understand in what sense it was said that the world, so full of worthy things, was made in the image of the great and first God. For this reason man can be called a 'microcosm'. Plato explained this in the *Timaeus* (CH VIII. 2, p. 268).⁶⁹ Or perhaps Mercury calls the world 'god' because it possesses the administration and fulfillment of God's powers; because it is vast, comprehending and embracing all bodily creatures; because it is the image of God and does not cease operating for the good and utility of created beings. The world is regulated by divine essence, which is the World Soul; or by *iamais*,⁷⁰ which contains and administers all created beings; or by universal nature, prudent governor and ruler of all created things. The world preserves the order that has been placed in it by God, who is good, so that things serve their purpose and persist. In so doing, the world obeys the will of its father and creator, for it is guided by God's judgement and will, not its own. Therefore it cannot have any defects. Thus this

⁶⁸ See Psalms 81. 1, 89. 6.

⁶⁹ Other considerations follow (on pp. 268–70) on the subject of the world as macrocosm and man as microcosm.

⁷⁰ The meaning of this word will be discussed on pp. 225–26.

great god, so obedient, is fullness of life. It is ordered and regular, made in the image of the greater world (i.e. the intelligible world). There is no part of this immortal world to which immortality has not been given, just as it has been given to the whole. It has been eternally preserved in its parts from destruction, although not from generation and corruption (XII. 15, p. 543).

All God's creatures received from him a form pressed into matter. Through it, in resemblance to their creator, all received an image of the holy Trinity. Therefore the Trinity is fully in everyone and whole in each of its three parts, which in every creature are essence, virtue, and effect. In the same way, at the beginning each creature was wholly present in the order and deliberation of the divine mind, whole in its creation, and whole in its development. Every creature passes through the following three states completely whole: 'conception', which takes place in the divine mind; creation, which is the real actuation of the thing; and development, which is the time of its operating and acting (IX. 5, p. 306).

Pantheism

A form of pantheism, although not explicitly stated, is implied in what Candale says regarding the presence of God in his creature — the world — and of God's essences and powers in the world and man. This is stated on p. 215 with regard to *CH V. 7*: all material things are products of God's invisible essences, as Paul says,⁷¹ on which account everything that has its essence from matter has it in God. And if it is formed matter, or a created being, then it is composed of matter and divine essence, which constitutes its form. As a result God has his essences in all things, and there is nothing in the universe that is not he. God is all the things that are and those that are not. This does not mean that he is things lacking essence, such as lies, nothing, and that which follows from them.⁷² Rather, since everything that can have essence was drawn from God, God is as much the things he has already

⁷¹ In the margin Candale refers to Hebrews 11, but this citation, too, is absolutely arbitrary, since that passage of scripture has a completely different subject, namely the value of faith. I have been unable to find the exact reference.

⁷² Cf. *CH VIII. 1*, p. 262: All created things are part of God's true essences, which are eternal, immortal, infinite, and incorruptible. Since he is being, God cannot suffer from any lack, which is properly an abolition or destruction of the thing in which divine essence is found. Therefore we shall say that the thing that has received its being from God cannot fall into nullity or lack, neither the intelligible part of the creation, i.e. its form, nor its material part; mind, or form, being divine essence, is eternal.

brought to light as those he has not yet produced, and he has them in himself, for he is the place whence they had to come forth and be produced. Since all the things that are in this world obtained their being from him alone, we can say that God possesses the being that each thing has obtained from him. God is therefore all things. 'All the things that exist', Mercury says, 'are in God', for all essences belong to him who is all things that have essence, and therefore all things obtain their essence through communication. That is why each thing that has being or essence does not possess it as its own property, but on loan from him to whom the essence chiefly belongs (*CH IX. 9*, pp. 320–21).

Candale takes up the subject of 'nothing' immediately thereafter (p. 320). He notes that John 1. 3, 'And nothing was made without him', agrees with the Hermetic text, which says 'God possesses the things that exist; none is outside of him, and he is outside of none'. Candale's quotation manipulates the text of the Gospel to no small degree, which simply says 'and without him [the Logos] there was nothing'. As a result the word 'nothing' must be understood in two ways, one positive, one negative, both of which, however, ultimately arrive at the same meaning. According to the first, that which lacks true being or essence, and for this reason is called 'nothing', is outside of God. Now, 'nothing', which consists in the utter lack of being, is shut out far away from God, and God is outside of nothing, because he is outside of all lack. Thus we can also understand the second meaning, that 'nothing is outside of him' in the sense that no thing is outside of him. All vices and sins are a kind of lack, since true sin does not consist so much in doing evil, but in lacking God. The lack related to each sin is in the thought, not in the execution, and therefore a lie is a true sin. In conclusion, sin is called 'nothing' because it is outside of God, and if it is outside of God then it lacks all essence (*IX. 9*, p. 321).

According to Mercury (*XIV. 5*), all things are only two — god and matter — because things are composed of matter and form, and form comes from God. But God is all things on account of the relationship between the maker and the things made, the one not being able to exist without the other. God is the thing made, which obtains all its parts from him. Thus it is not possible to separate them, since otherwise it would follow that a particular nature must be said to be God. This is wrong, for the particular nature is 'this part alone of God'. And although God is divided into his component parts and the creations of the material world, nevertheless he is not divided, but he is one and alone in and through all things. He must be considered universally present in all creations, compositions, and forms, for he comprehends all things; they all come from him and his essences and were composed and separated for his glory. From the point of view of their separation, then, none of these things is God. But if the whole is taken in its entirety, that is, including both corporeal creatures and intelligible parts, it lets nothing subsist

outside of it, and thus the essence of the entire whole is God, who can be neither separated nor divided but remains simple and one in one lone essence (p. 636).

It is form, and not matter, that bestows being on a thing (XIV. 6, pp. 638–39). Matter, if its action is left unimpeded, brings about lack, ruin, and destruction. This is in line with its natural impulse, which is characterized by lack of the divine, that is, of all essence. Therefore if matter is not sustained by form, which is the divine part, it tends in itself to ruin. And it follows that it is not matter that bestows life and movement, much less being, but rather the divine part, form. Paul says the same thing to the Gentiles in Acts 17. 28, ‘we move and have our being in him’. Our life, then, is divine essence, bestowed by God on the matter of every creation. This life is manifested in movement, which is not movement in place but the virtue through which the subject receives the power to move itself. That is why Mercury said that movement is located in the incorporeal subject, and Paul says that our incorporeal actions and virtues, by their nature and condition, cannot be contained or enclosed in matter, but that their environment is composed of their origin and superabundant source, that is, the greatness of God. The philosophers also agree with Paul that being is bestowed by incorporeal form and not by bodily matter. It follows that the being of all creatures is in God, and thus God is all creatures, since it is their form, and not their body or matter, from which their being derives. Thus God is all things, or better, all things are God (*CH* XVI. 13, p. 737).

Nature

After having been created, the world is ruled and guided by a force that is found within itself and that goes by various names: nature, World Soul, ‘*iamais*’.

‘Nature, which is true divine essence, is an ordained law and a virtue of God. From the beginning of creation it has guided all things in executing the order that the Creator imposed on all mortal and immortal beings for the time of their lives, essence, and duration.’ This definition of nature is general and also comprehends the two natures of man (since man has a dual nature). Nature even determines the behaviour of man’s immortal part. Starting at the moment of birth it distributes to each person his immortal part, that is, the rational soul endowed with the image of the Spirit of God (*CH* I. 15, p. 51).⁷³

When the various beings were created they had no intelligence or prudence to govern themselves. Rather their governance was entrusted to their guardian, the

⁷³ This point is treated more fully below, pp. 232–33.

divine law of nature. Thus Mercury is right to say that the world has its own prudence and intelligence, different from man's. Man, for his part, was endowed in his composition with the Holy Spirit, which gives form to his matter, and he is guided by free will, with which his soul was endowed. In this sense nature's administration is more excellent than man's, since man is guided by the imperfection of his judgement. For as a result of this imperfection, which comes from the imperfection of matter, man's judgement is unwilling to heed the counsel of the Holy Spirit and image of God. Thus man, who is the microcosm, is not forced to obey a law of his own, unlike the world, which on account of this obedience and the actions resulting from it is called 'similar to God', its creator (IX. 5–6, pp. 307–08).

Aion

When reading the *Corpus Hermeticum* Candale was confronted with the term *aion*. He realized that it does not merely signify 'eternity', which is its normal meaning, but that it possesses an ontological force (which has been described above, pp. 62–64). He therefore found it difficult to establish its meaning. In *CH* XI. 2, p. 426, he translates *aion* as 'le iamais', whose primary meaning is 'universal time'. Because it is infinite, *iamais* contains all actions and operations within itself. *Iamais* makes *aion* distinct from time, which instead involves the idea of termination in addition to that of action and movement.⁷⁴

But Mercury also uses *iamais* as a synonym for nature, which, as has been seen, is a divine essence and has been entrusted by God with the task of ruling the whole world and its creatures. As a result nature contains the World Soul, through which it directs all the things that are in the world, as well as *iamais*, through which it contains all things. God created *iamais*, that is, eternity; being of infinite duration, *iamais* had its beginning in God together with creation (p. 427). Characteristic of *iamais* is that it is always the same thing, always 'the same as itself' (*mesmesse*) (p. 428). *Mesmesse* is a new word that Candale uses to render the Greek *tautotes*. The essence of *iamais* and immortal time is in fact *mesmesse*, from which it is inseparable, just like the essence that is in God. Moreover, since *iamais* is subject to neither change nor corruption nor to the other effects of the world, its *mesmesse* consists in being a certain 'mesme' at any and all times (p. 428).

⁷⁴ The difference between time and *aeuum* is also determined by the fact that it is not time that measures the duration of the operations and actions of God's providence; rather it is the Greek *aion*, the Latin *aeuum*, and the French *iamais*. This *aeuum* is eternal, and matter is full of life because God has used it to give shape to all things.

The extensive section of the commentary devoted to *CH* XI. 3–4, pp. 432–37, continues the explanation of *iamais*. It is the power of God; it contains in itself the essences, which are the divine parts of all things, and thus it contains God's virtues and powers. Therefore all the virtues, actions, and powers that divine Providence ordained so that we would execute its works have been entrusted to nature, which is divine law or will, or to the World Soul, which is the governance of the universe, or to *iamais*, which is the same thing. The power of God, then, is manifested in nature, the World Soul, and *iamais*.⁷⁵ Thus all the processes and efforts through which matter receives soul, soul receives thought, and thought receives God are given to us and administered by *iamais*. It is divine essence, hoard of all equality, continuity, *mesmesse* or identity with itself, and all the other divine virtues and potencies necessary for the direction and governance of the world and its parts (p. 436). It follows that all parts, even the smallest, received their good from God, their creator, by means of *iamais*, which is the first intermediary of all generation and ordering of matter. It fills all bodies because it is found within this universal body; it embraces them from outside, filling the whole universe; it surrounds them with its holy virtues and the potencies of the divine essence; and it gives life to the universal and to general movements, directing and arranging their effects on matter. This World Soul, nature, or *iamais* vivifies this great world in all its beings from the outside (XI. 4, pp. 436–37). In conclusion, *aion-iamais* is the equivalent of the World Soul and is the intermediary between God and the world.

The Soul

The Human Soul

The section of the commentary on *CH* X. 6 is devoted to the human soul. Candale believes that the Hermetic text improperly uses the verb 'to create' with regard to the soul (pp. 344–45). The soul was most certainly created, but this does not mean that it cannot be a divine entity. As a matter of fact it is just that, because it derives from God and is incorporeal like him. Indeed, the verb 'to create' can also be used for incorporeal entities. The soul is God's 'communication', although this

⁷⁵ See also *CH* XI. 8, p. 449. In *CH* XIII. 11, p. 606, it is restated that God constituted only one divine essence to give to all the parts of the world all the powers, potencies, and actions that he arranged on and in all beings. Mercury sometimes called this essence 'World Soul', sometimes 'nature', sometimes 'iamais', and all things are ruled, administered, and governed by and through this essence. This nature and World Soul are one and the same thing.

does not happen in the manner of bodily things, which communicate among themselves because they are separate. 'Communication' is instead one of the many ways in which God 'creates'. One reason why some people do not think that the soul is divine is that they have not understood that the Holy Spirit was inserted into man's composition, on account of which man is called 'divine'.⁷⁶ Even among material creatures there is none that does not have a ray of divinity, thanks to the form communicated to all creatures (which is true divine essence). Of course, just because we think the soul is of divine essence, this does not mean it should be understood as God.

The World Soul

The World Soul is akin to the human soul, but it is distinguished in many ways. If matter is without form, form is the virtue that God places in matter by mixing and assembling the four elementary bodies. This divine form or virtue infused in matter was called 'soul' by the philosophers, even though it should not actually be called such, since it lacks two of the most important virtues of soul: immortality, which is the perpetual preservation of the essence that comes from God, and the dignity of directing an animated being. This dignity is found only in man, since a brute animal is not directed by any subject present in him, but only by its nature. Thus the philosophers, being ignorant of man's internal composition, affirmed that everywhere there is life, there is soul. Mercury, using the language of the philosophers, equally connects life to soul. And this despite the fact that he knows the difference between soul, which directs its particular subject, and nature, which directs in a general way the effects of all the forms in all particular beings (*CHI*. 17, p. 66). All beings were composed of matter and form, that is, certain essences of God, the chief among which is soul. In brute animals soul is manifested as a law, which is called 'nature' and is their pedagogue. In men, on the other hand, matter was accompanied by reason, which gave them the image and likeness of God. That is why Mercury says that Reason, which is the holy Mind, is the first model, the first form, and the first source of every living soul, since every soul comes from the Mind (*II*. 8, p. 117). Just as the world, which is beautiful, contains the wisest divine law, called nature, which is directed to rule everything and its parts (which are all creations of God), thus man, thanks to the dignity of the image of the Holy Spirit in him (which he received as part of his composition), is provided with free will, which functions like a law, but differently from the law of the world (*III*. 4, p. 142).

⁷⁶ As we shall see shortly, pp. 232–34.

Candale returns to the issue of the distinction between the World Soul and the human soul in a long section of the commentary devoted to *CH* XI. 10–15 (pp. 453–65). There is a soul that guides all actions and lives in the body, that is, the life of immortals, celestials, and brute animals. It is the World Soul, which guides them by actuating the law of nature, that is, universal nature, which is their true soul. Rational mortal beings — men — instead possess individual souls, distinguished from the World Soul by the free will that exists in them. There is only one soul, however. It presides over bodies composed of matter and form, just like there is only one divine essence, which is spread over the whole universe to guide it, and in every human being to guide each individual (XI. 11, p. 454).

The image of God is *iamais*, which is World Soul or universal nature, divine essence. It operates continually in all places, and it gives the world all its actions, movements, and powers of operation. The world is the image of *iamais*, which is the World Soul, since all potencies and virtues pass through it (XI. 15, p. 463).

Another important section devoted to the soul is the commentary on *CH* X. 6, pp. 342–52, especially p. 349. The World Soul is nature, which was ordered by God to perform its task. This task is fulfilled in the actions, the life, and the movements carried out during the course of the world and of its parts and created beings. The soul was given this task so stringently and bindingly that it can neither augment nor diminish it, and it spans from governing the elephant to governing the ant. One of the tasks of nature, or World Soul, is to give life to all creations, including man, since he is a material being. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, among its very many virtues, brought man free will. As a result God said ‘we make man in our image and likeness’, for it was not in nature’s power to bestow the image, which is the Holy Spirit of God and his (God’s) likeness. Man, in turn, being endowed with free will, is changeable — differently from the World Soul. But changes in the human soul only result from errors committed by its free will. One need not be amazed if God tolerates this defect in the essence which he bestowed on man, this essence being the manifestation of his glory. God could not create a being greater than man. But this creation, not being God, was imperfect and vicious, for it was directed by its own judgement, not by God’s. Since, then, God put his Holy Spirit into man along with the body, Mercury exclaims: ‘what an extraordinary miracle, subjecting the Creator to the will of a compound creation’. He does not say this because he considers the soul in the origin of its essence, nor because he considers the spirit of God a creation, but because the whole compound thing, together with matter, constitutes the creation (pp. 349–50). The World Soul is not as impeded or aggravated in its rule of the macrocosm as the human soul is in its rule of the

microcosm. The World Soul is impassive, whereas the human soul is subject to the passions on account of its free will, such that the divine essence is subject to passion in its composition, on account of the matter that disturbs the free will (p. 351).

As the Hermetic text says (XI. 2, p. 429), God's 'energies' are his Mind, that is, his Holy Spirit. They constitute some of the energies in man; another 'energy' is constituted by the soul, which God drew from his essence to govern the universe. The World Soul is divine virtue, which God put into the world under the World Soul's aspect; it must see to the actions, life, and movement of the whole world. And the human soul is detached from the World Soul in order to attend to the particular direction of each subject and to receive a greater honour, which it would not have received if it had remained in the World Soul. The World Soul is the Holy Spirit of God, placed in man.

The Governors of the Heavens and the Stars

Adhering to a long tradition of astrology and philosophy that dates back to Late Antiquity and is well attested in Hermetism (especially in the *Poimandres*), Candale believes that the universe is ruled by the seven 'governors', who oversee the rule of the seven heavenly spheres. From them comes the force that determines the life of the world and influences the life of the rational soul. Candale, then, must insert the function of the heavenly governors into his doctrine of the divine powers and energies, which are authors of the world's existence and preservation. The seven governors, that is, the seven planets, were created by the Holy Spirit. They must execute the law of God, called *fatum* by the Latins. Their power, however, is restricted to the sensible world. Many other heavenly bodies also exist with the same task as the governors and the planets, but they are not as powerful nor as close to us (*CHI*. 9, pp. 15–16). Indeed, all heavenly creatures have been entrusted with the rule of the sensible world in the region of the elements. This arrangement is called 'destiny' or 'fatal necessity'. For the material world the work of the governors (i.e. the planets) is a necessity, since they, not possessing judgement or will of their own, can influence human actions only with the necessity (one could say 'mechanically', almost 'through the physical force') that has been given them. By means of these influences and necessary actions of the heavenly bodies, *iamais* or universal nature governs material beings and preserves them in their state or order (XI. 5, p. 438). The seven planets, rulers, and governors assigned by the Holy Spirit to guide and direct matter in the region of the elements organize their action through the efficacy that has been given them, and they change and vary it in many different

ways, according to their circular movements. The necessity of their influence, however, does not depend on them individually but is ordered by the law of harmony and convenience. Mercury calls the planets 'worlds', as each has its own sphere and its own space appointed for the completion of its circuit. Each one has its own solid place, that is, one with three dimensions; they are situated below the first, great heaven, which contains the fixed stars. They are adorned with eternal order, which has given them immortality in their orbits and movements through a marvellous circular order, such that their end returns to the same point as their beginning (XI. 7, pp. 443–44). Those whom *CH* x. 22 calls 'gods of men' are the heavenly gods, that is, the stars (p. 402). Man is acted upon by this influence, which is necessary and is useful for his mind and the maintenance of his body, and therefore he can confess, under this aspect, to being subject to the world, as the text says. Mercury calls the heavenly bodies 'gods' in accordance with the linguistic usage of his age.

This influence of the stars, however, cannot determine or limit man's free will. The stars depend on the Holy Spirit, whereas man received and possesses in himself the head and the author of their dependence, that is, the very same Holy Spirit, as was seen above. If the stars received the dignity of immortality thanks to the Holy Spirit, man received the Holy Spirit itself, which is the author of all immortality. The stars did not receive the honour of independent judgement or the dignity of being able to govern their own behaviour according to their own will; man did. But men's bad behaviour furnishes the occasion for saying that God would have done better for them if he had placed them under the direction of destiny and the rule of the World Soul, rather than under their own free will (x. 24, p. 410).

The actuation of fate, the rule carried out by the powers assigned to the heavenly bodies, is called 'necessity'. It brings about all generations and corruptions, as well as the other processes and changes in matter, and therefore God's Providence, which is at once nature, World Soul, and divine essence, is present in all the actions and efficacies that are necessary for the direction and preservation of the world in all its parts. Necessity possesses power over all creatures, and it can force them to obey and carry out the order of the law imposed on them without mistakes occurring (XII. 14, p. 541).

All this happened after the fall of man, when man became subject to the law of nature. Nature saw that man wished to receive his second part, after the one given him by God in his creation, which is his immortal nature. That is, man wished to receive the mortal condition, and so nature imprinted on his matter those whom the Hermetic text calls 'seven men' and who conform to the nature of the seven governors. These seven men are the seven dispositions that each heavenly body emblazoned on man. They have the power of both sexes, that is, the power to act

and to cause.⁷⁷ And thus man was made to share in the mortal and the immortal part. The immortal part remained in the human soul together with the other spiritual and intelligible potencies produced by the image of God. The actions of the heavenly governors cannot influence such potencies. Man used his free will, which permits him to sense (but also not to sense) the governors' effects on him, to subordinate his matter to them (I. 16, p. 60).

Man

Candale's speculation exhibits an intense interest in man that is typical of Renaissance Hermetism. Man is the third living being after God and the world. This order is not based on the dignity of the subjects, but on their capacity (indeed, the world contains man), priority, and posteriority. Man was made in the image of the world, just like the world was made in the image of God with all his virtues and operations, continually operating in the likeness of divine goodness. The world and man are called 'images of God' because they possess divine virtues and actions, which they must administer and distribute. This third living being has *sympatheia* with the second, that is, it communicates with it. But it also has the mind of the first living being, God, with whom it communicates by means of essences and virtues — a privilege given only to man, not to the world. And the excellence of this third living being — that is, man, third after God and the world — lies in the fact that his efficacies extend everywhere, both in incorporeal, divine, intelligible things and in bodily ones (*CH* VIII. 5, pp. 278–79).

Man is composed of three parts: material body, living soul, and Holy Spirit, which is the image of God (IV. 6, p. 164). Free will serves to make man become God, despite his imperfection, not in the sense that man is God in his principle essence, but in the sense that his chief part is the image of God, which by its nature belongs to the divine essences. Man, after having lived according to virtue, will divest himself of all other things, and thus he will return to the place from which he has come. That is why he is said to be in God (IV. 7. p. 168; IV. 8. pp. 173–74).

The Holy Spirit constitutes the form in man's composition, whereas matter, with its imperfection, disturbs man's judgement. Therefore a general disposition has developed in man: having abandoned the body of his innocence, which was not subject to passion, he now finds himself generally disturbed by the passions. Thus the Holy Spirit of God became a prisoner in the body of man (I. 14, pp. 46–47).

⁷⁷ Note the allegorical interpretation of the concept of male and female (*arrenothelys*). Man is active and female is passive.

'Essential' Man

This theme of Hermetism, present in the *Asclepius* and also attested in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (see p. 69), is also central for Candale. He maintains that this concept was originally taught by Mercury and was then adopted by Paul, who posited that in man exist two men opposed to one another, one spiritual or intelligible, the other bodily and sensible. Mercury calls them 'essential man' and 'material man', Paul 'interior man' and 'exterior man'.⁷⁸ Jesus incarnate was the prime example of the two men. The interior man was his Holy Spirit, which lived in him bodily in the fullness of its divine nature (*CH* I. 15, pp. 53–54). Man, being twofold, has inside of himself his principle essence and immortal part, which is the intelligible and essential part, composed of the holy virtues of life and eternal light (I. 21, p. 77). The strong pantheism that characterizes Candale's Hermetism brings him to the following confusion between the two forms of God's presence in man: the presence of the divine virtues in man is, according to him, fully analogous to the presence of the Son of God, as a divine Person, in Christ incarnate. As a result, Candale interprets Paul's 'interior man' in a highly idiosyncratic way, in accordance with his conception — which, as we saw above, was tinged with pantheism — of God's presence in the whole universe.

If he is present in the created universe, God must also be present in man. This doctrine is based on two familiar biblical affirmations. The first is that man was made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1. 26).⁷⁹ The second is that God

⁷⁸ See also *CH* I. 26, p. 96; *CH* II. 2, p. 102. Interior man, being formed of divine essence, is called 'essential man'.

⁷⁹ The two terms do not constitute a hendiadys. Rather, as one often finds in ancient Christianity beginning with Irenaeus and Clement, they indicate two different conditions of the soul. Candale explains this in *CH* I. 12, pp. 27–29. As Clement said with regard to Peter's preaching (that is, as the author of the pseudo-Clementines says), there is a difference between image and likeness. Man possesses the image whether he wants to or not, since it is part of his composition, whereas the likeness is something uncertain and contingent, especially after original sin. The image of God can only have been received into the incorporeal parts of man. In any case, both the image and the likeness were bestowed on the first man. It was not able to be given to the soul, because the soul sins and consents to evil, and such does not befit the image of God. Thus Candale expounds the doctrine of the soul based on what Irenaeus says, which is quoted at the end of the page: the human soul is accompanied by two parts, one of which contains mind, knowledge, judgement, and the other virtues, and was called 'rational' by the philosophers. The other is bodily, was called 'carnal', and contains the vices. Since, then, this cannot be the image of God, it is thus certain that the image of God is in the rational part, which always desires virtue. It is this part which Paul called 'interior man'. Interior or spiritual man is, in man, the image of God, which Paul, like Mercury

breathed into man and made him an animate being (Genesis 2. 7). According to a conception very widely diffused in ancient Christian thought, God's 'breath' is a proper part of him. Consequently, man has something of God in him. Along with the breath of God, man (and more precisely his soul) was infused with divine virtues or powers, such as intelligence, wisdom, strength, charity, etc. These can only be comprehended by the mind, not the senses. Consequently, the dignity flowing from God's fellowship freed man from his submission to the governors of the sensible or material world. Thus man was created immortal, until his sin deprived him of immortality (I. 9, pp. 20–21).

But the breath of God is the Spirit of God, as its name indicates (breath = *pneuma* = Spirit), and, as is generally believed, divine inspiration consists in the presence of God's Spirit itself in man. Thus the reason and mind that are in man are the same thing as the Spirit of God (XVI. 9, p. 715). Elsewhere, however — and still according to Hermetic doctrine — Candale distinguishes between mind and reason (IV. 3, pp. 150–51). He who bestowed reason on all men, he notes, did not give all of them his holy Mind (that is to say, true likeness with himself). Indeed, divine mind and likeness with God do not belong to man's elementary composition, necessary for his being *qua* man, but rather they are indispensable for man to be happy and to do his duty: 'This is what we said in the first treatise, speaking of the image and likeness of God, about which Mercury and St Peter in his *Recognitiones* wondrously concur.'⁸⁰ So Mercury says that, although all men received reason, not all received mind. Thus the human soul, having reason within itself, possesses the model or image of God (on which it was created), whereas it is the holy Mind that bestows God's likeness on it. This doctrine was known not only to St Peter, Mercury, and others who received grace and revelation from God, but also to the philosophers who advanced closest to the true knowledge of God, one of whom was Plato. Here Candale refers to the famous *homoiosis theoi* ('likeness to god') doctrine, diffused in the Platonism (including the Christian Platonism) of the Imperial Age. In conclusion, the image of God is constituted by reason (*logos*

before him, called 'thought'. This part can be called 'presence of the Spirit of God', as Mercury will say a little later. In conclusion, man can only receive the presence of intelligible God into his intelligible part, which is the rational one. And thus the image of God in man must be this mind, or rational part, the part constituted by understanding, and Mercury will often say later that true salvation is knowledge, because only it, in man, can receive the image and the presence of God. A quotation of John 17. 3 follows: 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.'

⁸⁰ See the preceding note.

according to Hermetists), which all men possess; his likeness, on the other hand, is constituted by mind (*nous*), which is only possessed by the elect.

One could say that Candale insists on this theme everywhere in his commentary. Here only a few passages will be cited. Mind, which was bestowed on man, deserves to be honoured more than all the creations, since it is the Spirit of God itself that was communicated to him. Our mind is a true divine essence. The divine essences are equivalent to the divine mind put into man (I. 6, pp. 9–10; I. 9, p. 17). The part of man that contains the spirit of God was called the ‘rational part’. By means of it man obtains comprehension and understanding of heavenly things, just as it was obtained by the prophets, the apostles, and all those who sought God’s grace and love using human reason in its true, and not its perverted, state. This happened despite the fact that man lost his innocence with original sin (XVI. 12, p. 730).

Consequently, the mind that God bestowed on man and the world so that they could maintain themselves is the true Spirit of God, and thus it is of the same essence and excellence as God’s other perfections, for it is inseparable from him. This chief and most excellent part of man, which God communicated to him at his creation with the name ‘image and likeness’, is his ‘understanding’ and ‘reasoning faculty’; it is the Holy Spirit of God. As a result mind possesses the same essence as God, for it is his Holy Spirit, which has the same essence as the Father and the Son. Although this holy Mind is oriented outwards in its communication with infinite subjects, that is, with men and all other beings, heavenly and mortal, on which it bestows graces and virtues and ‘energies’, nonetheless it is not separate from the essence of God. It expands like the Sun’s light, which issues from it and simultaneously is found in the whole sky and half the earth, and still it is not separate from the Sun. Indeed, light is a divine essence and virtue, given to creatures by the Sun; for the Sun, too, is truly of divine essence just like thought. Light is neither diminished in its power nor separated from its subject on account of being communicated to many others. In this it differs from material things (XII. 1, pp. 492–93). In conclusion, God is present in the whole universe because his ‘virtues’ are found in the whole universe.

In man, as in God, the Holy Spirit and the Word stand in a reciprocal relationship, being the uttered word and the reasoning mind (i.e. the Word) and the Holy Spirit of God. Thus mind and word are equal and immortal like every other perfection of God, and, as the word is the image of the spirit, thus the spirit is the image of God, and all three are the same thing. The word is guided and ruled by reason, and there is a similarity between the word and *Logos*. Thus word and reason, comprehended in the term *logos*, are the image of the holy Mind, spirit of God, placed in man. The holy Word Son of God is he through whom God manifested himself,

and without whom we cannot have knowledge of God, as he says in Matthew 11. 27: 'No man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him.' Thus the Son was called 'image of the Father',⁸¹ and he reveals and represents for us the Father, just as his virtue of the word is called 'image' of mind and represents for us the Spirit of God, which is invisible in us and communicates his holy virtues and will to us. In conclusion, the Holy Spirit that is in man is the image and likeness of God the creator (XII. 14, p. 539).

The Spirit's presence in us, through our mind and the virtues deriving from the image of God, permits knowledge of God. Indeed, God can only be known by himself (IV. 10, p. 186) — an affirmation that is continually repeated. God is first seen and known when we perceive his effects, without his essences or intelligible virtues being seen (a doctrine earlier maintained by Christian apologetics, which had taken it from ancient Stoicism). Indeed, God wished to make it easier for man to know him. For man, having already received intelligible knowledge by means of God's spiritual virtues, can now know him more intimately through his bodily senses, which are coarse. God, who is invisible in his essences, therefore manifests himself in his effects (V. 1, p. 194).

In man (as has already been said) the Holy Spirit of God, which was bestowed on him at his creation, is accompanied by divine powers and virtues. But the divine virtues were bestowed on man above all in order for him to obtain knowledge of God (XIII. 18, p. 619; XIII. 19, p. 620). And since true salvation consists in knowing God, as John (17. 3) and Mercury say, it is necessary for this part of man, which is the Mind of God, to be God himself, through whom man knows God. The Mind is the image of God in man. The image of God is not the soul, because otherwise God would judge himself when he judges the soul, and if the soul sins, then God would sin (XII. 1, p. 495). Mercury calls the mind communicated by God to man 'God', whereas the rest of the world does not have communication with God's graces, virtues, powers, and efficacies. That is why Paul says that we have not received the spirit of the world, which is restricted and limited, but the Spirit of God, in order that we might know what we have from him (XII. 1, p. 499).

Reason is man's most important part, since it is essentially nothing other than the Holy Spirit, the true God, which was bestowed on man in order that he might know him. In man, then, are the Spirit (image of God), the body, and the soul, which possesses free will. The more man conforms to the Holy Spirit and the more

⁸¹ Colossians 1. 15.

perfect he is, the closer he comes to knowing God and to using the true reason by which God wants to be known (II. 8, pp. 115–16).

That God can only be known by himself, and that for this reason God bestowed the Spirit on man, is repeated countless times: for example, VI. 5, pp. 239–40; X. 15, p. 378; XIII. 7, p. 591; XIV. 1, p. 625; XVI. 9, p. 715; XVI. 12, p. 730; etc.

Man and Fate

Fatum is the action and order that the Holy Spirit gave to the heavenly bodies over all the creatures that inhabit the region of the elements (*CH* I. 9, p. 17). Thus the soul is subjected to the influence of the seven governors, and since these influences are exercised on the soul, they have influence over the divine actions and virtues (I. 16, pp. 61–63). The power given to the seven governors has caused some people to conceive dangerous opinions, such as that man is bound by their influence and thus has no reason to oppose the commission of evil, since evil would be wished by God. But fatal destiny rules only carnal man. He is subjected to desires, which influence his senses and, through them, his soul. Over essential man the governors have no hold, nor do they influence his will.⁸² Man has the Holy Spirit, which continually pushes him towards salvation. In conclusion, every work of man is performed by his free will, and man is not subject to the influence of the governors, that is, *fatum*, though such influence is not wholly escapable (I. 9, pp. 17–21). When the Holy Spirit of God created the heavenly bodies, it gave them the rule, the governance, and the direction of the sensible world, not of the intelligible one. This direction of the sensible world has the name *fatum* (XII. 5, p. 507).

God wanted man to be excellent, and thus he did not let him be created by the seven governors, although they had the task of creating all beings. Instead he himself created man, without any mediator. This creation does not regard the body so much as the fact that God put his Holy Spirit and image into man's composition, just as he placed matter around a living soul. After having created man, God did not want him to be subject to *fatum*, or nature. Now, since man's actions also include intelligible ones, which pertain to his divine part, and since the intelligible

⁸² Candale poses the problem of whether the governors drive matter towards evil. They can arouse man's desire, but since they do not do it of their own will (and vice consists solely in evil will), they cannot be said to be properly evil. Heavenly beings, to whom destiny has been entrusted, have no vice or defect in themselves; rather they perform their actions according to how they find matter and the things subjected to it, according to how such things are disposed to receive it. It is in this disposition of matter that defect and vice are found, not in the action of the heavenly beings, which in itself is good and was created perfectly (pp. 20–21).

virtues are essences and limbs, so to speak, of the Holy Spirit, which this creature controls, fate does not control the intelligible virtues. The seven men of whom Mercury speaks in I. 16 are the seven various dispositions, which were imprinted and branded on the soul in accordance with its will. They are accompanied by the actions or passions of the seven natures, the seven governors of sensible reality. They are imprinted on the matter, by the matter on the senses, and by the senses on the soul. These seven men, or dispositions, are imprinted on the soul together with the form, or nature devoid of reason, which man obtained with his sin of wanting to inhabit matter. It is that stain which theologians call the *fomes* (tinder) of sin, that is, inclination to sin, which is in man and to which man subjected himself (I. 16, pp. 61–63).⁸³ This tendency to obey the actions of heavenly beings is what theologians call 'original sin'; this sin produces *fomes* in us, which gives access to the avenging spirit (I. 23, p. 82).

All men, being provided with a material body, are subject to the actions of fate and the influences of the heavenly bodies, to which the administration and direction of the sensible world were entrusted. But — and this is very important — only God and his parts are free of the influence of fate, and consequently intelligible man, which is true divine essence, is not subject to it; only the bodily part is subject to fate. In saying this Candale latches on (although, perhaps, not consciously) to what certain late antique writers had said about the freedom of the wise man. However, he continues, certain people mistakenly attribute the utmost importance to destiny. Others, conversely, ignoring the distinction between material and intelligible reality, and wishing to oppose the philosophers, maintain that the heavenly bodies dispatch no action or virtue to man, thus falling into the opposite error. In conclusion, destiny not only rules bodies (in accordance with the task it was given by God), but it also has the greatest power over the soul; for the soul is subordinated to it through its subjection to bodily things, which destiny commands. This, however, does not hold for those elect individuals who are governed by holy Mind, which they obey, renouncing all desire (XII. 6–7, pp. 511–16).

Destiny does not trouble mind, for mind is more powerful. Indeed, the opposite is the case: mind rules destiny. Similarly, the soul is never subject to destiny except when it commits the sin of despising and refusing the aid of the holy Mind that was bestowed on it. Therefore, although the body is subjected to destiny, the soul of the noble man is not (XII. 9, pp. 525–27).

⁸³ See also *CH* I. 21, p. 77: Man also had the lowest part, made of matter subject to alteration and the imperfections produced by fate. Essential man is immortal. The rulers of matter have no power over him.

The Fall of the First Man

When Mercury says (*CH* 1. 13) that man, after his birth, was left by the father in the sphere of operation, he is referring to Moses' account (Genesis 2. 8), where God is said to have placed man in the paradise of Eden. There man was free to observe the works of the seven governors, who, being creations of God like him, were his brothers. And as Mercury says that God had left all his works to man, thus Moses says that God had allowed man to eat all the fruits of the earth, on account of his good treatment of the Holy Spirit of God that was in him. The prohibition against eating of the tree of knowledge corresponds to what Mercury says, namely that by means of the gifts and understanding he received, man was permitted to use and command all creations, provided that he not abandon the contemplation of the Father in order to follow the creations of his own accord. Man was thus abandoned in this lowest of all spheres, deceiving himself that he could rule here below thanks to his own virtue and power, separate from that of God. He thus devoted himself to the bodily senses, to material works, and to the effects of the seven governors, as if the stars were saying to him: 'you wanted to share in our effects on matter, which are nothing other than powers of changing, corrupting, and generating. Thus from now on you will be subject to corruption, generation, and change.'⁸⁴ This fall of the first man seems to have been recorded by Moses just as, earlier, it had been recorded by Mercury in hieroglyphics. The origin of man is such an important event that it was narrated by both Moses and Mercury. As with Mercury, when Moses received the revelation on the mountain, God told him to reveal certain things and to hide others. And so Moses and Mercury come to the same conclusion: both affirm that man's sin was to have abandoned his true state, the one for which he had been made, namely the contemplation, praise, and worship of God. What Mercury, as a philosopher, says happened on account of the senses, Moses says happened on account of a woman, which is the weakest part of man and is thus more given to sensible things (1. 13, pp. 37–40).

⁸⁴ Also on p. 664, in a passage devoted to the exaltation of nature and the powers of the sun, Candale says that the matter bestowed on man was free of falsehood and change, and that he was given immortal, unchangeable, and incorruptible matter. Now, the sun preserved it, whereas man lost it, but not because God left to the sun the tendency to preserve or lose it, but because he did not give the sun either will or independent judgement. Indeed, in necessity he dispensed his virtues and actions to it. Thus man, finding himself free of constraint and not being guided by God, but rather left to his own free direction of himself, showed quite early on that he was not ruled by a perfect master like the sun was. For the sun was guided by divine providence, whereas man was guided by human prudence, which immediately made his matter corruptible and mortal, changeable and false.

As a result of his sin and fall, man's faculty of understanding was so damaged and weakened that he was forced to make recourse to the senses of the body, which his mind uses to receive intelligible things, instead of receiving them directly through the divine model. This dulling thus produced sin in our mind. In man nature is not united with the senses, as it is in beasts, but with the mind. This means that the nature of beasts is only to sense, whereas that of man is to understand and to know. Human understanding, which we see is so infinite in its actions, is nothing other than the true image of God and the Holy Spirit. Thanks to the Spirit, man, while in the state of innocence, only performed divine and supernatural actions. Then sin and his desire for matter dimmed and blinded the eyes of his mind. Once blind, man was barred from communicating with the divine model, in which his intelligible virtues had been wont to obtain every kind of knowledge, beauty, and perfection (IX. 2, pp. 291–92).

The text of *CH* XIII. 7 says that the soul's 'avengers' (i.e. its punishers), which come from matter, were located in the soul itself. This means that they do not come from God, but from man, who by his own fault allowed his matter and bodily senses to cause these avengers to arise in himself (see pp. 24–25 above). The first act of vengeance (or punishment) is ignorance, through which man is shut out of all true knowledge. The second is sadness, the third profligacy, the fourth gluttony, etc. There are twelve depravities, which Candale thinks of as 'sins' originating in matter (pp. 593–96).

The Sun and Stars

Candale devotes notable attention to the sun — in keeping with the interest that the issue aroused in his times — although he remained committed to traditional geocentrism. Since the world is material, he says, it is necessarily directed by the heavenly bodies. Mind, which is the Holy Spirit of God, gave them the rule of the sensible and material part of the world. Among these heavenly bodies, the Sun (which Candale always capitalizes), is the head and chief operator, such that the other stars receive light from it; light is divine, and it is the means by which the stars operate and effect their actions together with the sun. And although the sun is the creator of all things (as said in *CH* XVI. 7), nevertheless it directs and administers the things under it in obedience to the order and guidance of the World Soul, which is nature (p. 703). The sun's actions and efficacies are wondrous. As a result some have worshiped it as if it were God (XIV. 7, p. 641).

CH XV. 7 says that God gave matter the privilege of carrying out his operations in the region of the elements. Candale comments at length on this passage (pp.

663–66). The material bodies, he explains, are the stars and the heavenly bodies. Although they are immortal and incorruptible in the way they were created, and although their matter was preserved from the general subjection to destruction that it performs in other bodies, nonetheless they all experience change within themselves. The Sun is the exception: it is not known to experience any change, whereas all the stars do. But even though every movement produces alteration or change, the only change found in the heavenly bodies is their movement itself (for they do not belong to the sphere of elementary bodies and change, change being something similar to a falsehood, as Mercury says). This change is produced by the fact that all the stars are illuminated by the sun, and on account of the sun's movement and their own they appear in various and different aspects, and thus they do not always possess the same clarity. God reserved for himself the right to endow his creations (the sun) with material that is limpid and free of falsehood. The first kind of matter was that which he bestowed on the sun, which is the most excellent matter of that which he gave to the stars, whereas the second was that which God bestowed on man, the most excellent of all his creations.

All the heavenly bodies, like the moon, receive their light from the sun. Now, the sun in no way disposes of the task entrusted to it by God of its own will. Rather, being a pure and simple instrument, it retains all the actions, operations, and powers that come from God. Thus Mercury gives the name of 'truth' to the sun in its divine form and essence undisturbed by matter, since this truth itself uses the sun as an instrument and operates by being present in all its actions and operations. It follows that the sun's direction corresponds to truth itself, and that the sun's body has no part at all of falsehood. Thus the sun does not hinder but rather assists the operation of 'pure truth'. It is called 'truth' because the compound of God and matter, in which truth exercises its rule, can also be called by the name of its most excellent part, that is, truth, just like those men in whom matter did not hinder God's work were called 'gods' (see Psalm 81. 1 and 81. 6). It is not possible for the sun to breach order, nor to err in any way or in any place, since the care and direction of all its operations was not entrusted to it but rather resides in its guardian, the one divine truth. If Mercury worships the truth of the sun, some ignorant person might be led to think that he was an idolater. But in the sun are found that pure matter as well as form, which is constituted by light. Unlike what happens in other creations, here matter in no way hinders the form, which is divine virtue. Thus form remains in the sun together with the virtue and dignity that form has in God. Nevertheless the sun is not God, since it is not, like man, an image or a representation of God in his entirety. Thus the sun does not have the other divine virtues, such as free will, judgement, mind, etc. That is why Mercury

said that the compound of the sun, being highly honoured by God, must be venerated, but the worship of the sun consists in worshipping and praising its divine essences and virtues, that is, 'in spirit and in truth', as the Gospel says (John 4. 24).

In any case, the One and the Good, of which Mercury speaks to Tat (XV. 8), is beautiful, great, more active, and more beneficent than the sun, which is only God's instrument (pp. 667–68). The world and the sun do not give us anything of their own but are only ministers and dispensers of the goods given to us by God, sovereign Good (X. 2–3, p. 333).

CH XVI. 5 provides the impulse for a long section (pp. 697–99) devoted to sun worship. The sun possesses the honour and the task, entrusted to it by God, of operating on the world. Mercury venerates it after that lone One who is above the sun and its powers, for the One created it and entrusted his powers to it so that it would serve him and execute his commands. Thus Aesculapius, that is, Asclepius in the Hermetic text, after speaking about God, speaks about the Sun as the chief minister of God's operations in universal nature. For this reason we, too, worship it, on account of the honour and reverence owed to its Lord and master, and we admire its powers, or better, those of its Lord which are in it. Nevertheless, the sun is only a servant, a carrier of God's message. Governing the world and matter, it attracts all things to itself. Its light is the divine essence and virtue by means of which God has the sun, his creature, manifest all material things. Of course, intelligible things, those suitable to humans, do not need the light of the sun in order to be known by man but rather the light of the sun of righteousness,⁸⁵ which is Christ, Son of God and Holy Spirit, to whom alone the dispensation and ministry of light belong. As a result, whatever manner light assumes, it constitutes one sole virtue which, being divine, can produce many effects. The material ones are entrusted to the sun; the intelligible ones remain in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit.

The sun's light is the receptacle of the divine essences. These are unworthy of being received by material bodies without an intermediary, for they would burn all matter, even the earth of which bodies are made. That is why the heavenly bodies, which are composed above all of air and fire, are more worthy elements (as instruments of the Holy Spirit), and their composition contains little of the other two elements (earth and water), which instead are found in earthly animals. Thus, the receptacle of light is the noble body of the sun, and light is the receptacle of the divine virtues and essences, which were entrusted to the sun. It is not that the sun possesses knowledge, sentiment, or consciousness. Rather, Aesculapius means to

⁸⁵ A reference to Malachi 4. 2.

say that only the sun can witness or perceive the essences that have been communicated to it.

Demons and their Function

The interpretation of the sixteenth treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* introduces the problem of the existence and function of demons. The sun, as has been seen, is God's chief minister and has the task of governing material things; it is served and aided by countless angels and demons, who carry out the actions and operations allotted to the sun and the other stars for the purpose of governing matter and maintaining it in its nature and state of continual change. And that is why Mercury says that the sun is surrounded by companies of demons charged with performing its actions. They are numerous because of the great number of effects that the sun must perform (*CH* XVI. 8, pp. 707 and 710) — and not only the sun, but also the immortal heavenly bodies. When Candale speaks of 'demons' he means Christian angels, which are called 'demons' according to Greek usage (XVI. 9, pp. 717–18), although, logically, he is aware of the distinction between good and evil angels.

The angels diverged from justice on account of their free will. This is no surprise, considering that man did the same thing even though he possesses much greater excellence and perfection than angels do. For he received his maker himself into his composition; to angels, however, the maker had only communicated one of his graces (XVI. 10, p. 720). The essence of demons consists in their efficacy or virtue of producing effects. This is God's power, given to them as a form at their creation. This virtue, being, like all the others, an essence of God, serves as the form of angelic beings — to use the language of the philosophers, who define form as the entity that gives essence to the subject. The administration and power of all the changes that the stars have the task of performing, thus influencing all earthly affairs, is also imputed to demons, who execute their administration and rule (p. 722). The heavenly influences actuated by demons are not all evil and vicious; rather some are disposed to various virtues, such as religion, the study of letters, patience, etc. (*CH* XVI. 11, p. 724).

Demons are the performers of heavenly actions. The direction of earthly things has fallen to them on account of man's sin. They produce movements of matter, soothing and excitements of the appetites, wishes, desires, and the other actions that were assigned to them for their management of sensible things, or *fatum*. The World Soul uses the aid of the sun and its retinue of demons as its instruments, and for this reason the sun and its retinue of demons provide nature with its own

potency, which is God, by giving shape and composition to bodies or by distributing form and divine virtue for the making of living beings (pp. 731–32).

Demons also influence man (*CH* XVI. 11, pp. 725–27). After his sin, man found himself a prisoner of the heavenly powers. His reason is dominated by fatal destiny. If he so wished, then destiny would have no power over him, but, not wishing this, he has made himself an instrument of demons. Demons govern human bodies with their actions and therefore only have power over the material part of man. Nevertheless, through the senses that communicate sensible things to the intelligible part of the soul, the fatal, heavenly actions performed by demons have a certain access to the soul. Things consisting in vice cannot depend on God, since, being the opposite of the source of essence, they suffer from lack and have no essence. God is not responsible for evil. In divine operations, which were entrusted to nature (or the World Soul and its ministers), man is only a simple instrument, like the sun and the other creations. For in these operations nothing is subject to his will, just as nothing is subject to the will of the heavenly bodies, which at any rate do not even possess will (*CH* XVI. 13, pp. 732–36).

But the rational part of the soul never wanted to consent to the desire for material things excited by destiny, nor to heavenly operations and their demons. Rather it always held fast to divine Reason, and that is why it is called 'rational', in view of its communication with the Holy Spirit, which was bestowed on it, full of all reason and virtue. The rational soul is therefore not subject to the dominion of demons, and it is certainly not subjected to the fatal actions which demons perform. On this soul, then, shines the ray of the Sun of righteousness, which is the true Son of God. This ray shines forth from the sun to the good soul (p. 727). Therefore if man remains united with the Holy Spirit of God, he will never be subjected to any power of God entrusted to the ministry of mortal or immortal beings. He rules all of them. Indeed, we can see that, when it was necessary to manifest the glory and power of God, all the actions of heaven and of any kind of nature whatsoever were conquered by the miracles and the marvellous effects performed by the prophets, the apostles, and the saints (p. 728).

Regeneration and Man's Return to God

Candale anticipated modern scholars in seeing a proper doctrine of complete spiritual regeneration in treatise XIII of the *Corpus*. According to Mercury, he says, the author of this regeneration is God made man, as Christ would himself confirm much later (John 3. 5). The path to God is religion, that is, 'devotion united with

knowledge', as late antique Hermetic texts had already said (pp. 17–18 above) (*CH* VI. 5, p. 241).⁸⁶

Man's palingenesis accompanies his reascent to heaven. The passage that best describes this reascent is, of course, *CHI*. 24. When man descended towards matter and corruption, Candale explains, he became dirty, taking his dispositions and impressions from the heavenly creatures. In the course of his rebirth he follows the same path in reverse, climbing on high, towards the Father and creator, as is said in *CH* XIII. 5, pp. 587–88, and he abandons the influences, mental dispositions, and inclinations which his soul had received through matter. In his ascent to God man passes through the heavens of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn (note that the sun occupies the central position). Then comes the ogdoad, that is, the eighth nature, the nature of God.⁸⁷ Having reached the height of his ascent, man can thus contemplate and praise his creator. John says so, agreeing with Mercury: 'and now they are made similar to the sons of God'.⁸⁸ If Mercury uses the term 'to deify', it corresponds to John's words: 'I and my Father are one' (John 10. 30) (pp. 85–88).

When we have taken on the likeness of God the Father and creator — a likeness that, as Peter says in his *Peregrinations* (see pp. 193 and 232 above), consists in being righteous and religious, in doing wrong to no one — then we shall find ourselves far from matter. And the spirit of God, not finding any resistance in man, will carry him off and elevate him, having found him similar to itself.

⁸⁶ The wars of religion raging in Candale's time prompt him to reflect on the necessity of distinguishing between true and false religion. Devotion without knowledge often lapses into misdeeds (pp. 241–43, see margin).

⁸⁷ This is an echo of the eschatological doctrines of ancient Christianity. After the six days of creation (i.e. of the material world) comes the seventh, which is the day of God's rest and of eternal rest, and the eighth, which is the day of God's transcendent reality.

⁸⁸ The origin of this quotation is obscure; perhaps it is a manipulation of John 3. 2–3 (or John 1. 12).

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY REPRESENTATIVES OF ITALIAN HERMETISM

Agostino Steuco

A reading of the *De perenni philosophia libri decem*, a long work by Agostino Steuco (1497–1549), bishop of Gubbio and a learned fixture of the Vatican Library, gives the impression of an enthusiastic spirit of concord. The author's basic position consists in maintaining that the similarities, even the superficial ones, between Christianity and ancient philosophies (from those of Hermes, the Chaldaeans, and Orpheus, down to Plato) derive from a common point of inspiration; thus he ignores the fundamental differences between Christian dogma and pagan thought. Like Lazzarelli, Steuco takes up Ficino's concept of *pia philosophia*, although without Lazzarelli's Christian and Hermetic mysticism. Steuco's demonstration of a continuity between Christian revelation, on the one hand, which occurred in a specific time and place with the coming of Christ, and the theosophies that preceded it, on the other, is based on continuous scholarly research. Thus his various works give the impression of an inexhaustible quarry of notes, mined from the most disparate sources by his extraordinary erudition. Steuco's work adheres to a fundamental concept, that of *philosophia perennis*, which he adopts as a kind of motto of his thought.¹

¹ What follows is based on Augustini Steuchi Eugubini episcopi, *De perenni philosophia libri decem. De mundi exitio. De Eugubii, urbis suae nomine, Tractatus* (Parisiis: apud Michaellem Sonnum, 1578). Steuco's Hermetism has been examined in the context of the history of the diffusion of late antique philosophical doctrines in the Italian Renaissance by Muccillo, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, especially pp. 42–56.

The *De perenni philosophia*

The *De perenni philosophia libri decem* is Steuco's magnum opus. The eighth chapter of book one, significantly entitled *De Mente, Prole divina, ex Mercurio Trismegisto: Eademque, Creatrice animi humani, sicut ex Chaldaeo Philone*, contains the following lines:

In order to realize that all ages, all places, all peoples concur in preaching the truth, you must read what Mercury Trismegistus has to say about this Mind. He said that the Father, although he is Mind, generated a second mind-craftsman, as we shall explain later.² In the *Pimander* this mind-craftsman is shown appearing and speaking to Mercury himself, just as it had appeared to Adam, Abraham, Moses, and many other divine fathers [...]. It said to him: behold, Mind is speaking to you about the Father and Generator, saying that it leads the good and the reverent to Him, that it itself is the guide to the Father and to the Father's love.³

This is the conclusion:

So we are invited by the three greatest theologians, two of them most ancient, one more recent,⁴ to the worship, love, and reminiscence of God. In the works of the second and third theologian Mind itself speaks; in the first another speaks about Mind. The Father is named by all, and Mind itself talks about the Father. The Chaldaean⁵ speaks of the Mind of the Father. Finally, after the Mind says many things in Mercury's book, Mercury himself responds: 'You have explained many things to me well, oh Mind, just like I wanted.' There is therefore no longer any doubt or wonder as to why the Platonists and many others before Plato, why Anaxagoras and those mentioned by Plato exalted, celebrated, and spoke of Mind. All the theologians before Plato did the same.⁶

² A reference to chapter XXII, as we shall see.

³ 'Ut agnoscas, omnia undequaque ad veritatem praedicandam saecula, gentes omnes facere concursum, audienda sunt quae de Mente hac loquitur Mercurius Trismegistus. Ubi dixerat, quod cum Pater sit Mens, genuit alteram Mentem opificem, ut declarabitur postea: hanc ipsam mentem opificem sibi ipsi Mercurio, cui apparuerat, sicuti apparuit Adae, Abraham, Mosi, multisque aliis divinis patribus, sic inducit loquentem in Pimandro [...]. Habes Mentem de Patre, ac Genitore loquentem, ad quem ait se adducere bonos et pios, se ducem esse ad Patrem, ad paternam charitatem.' See John 14. 2–3.

⁴ Mercury and the Chaldeans are the more ancient ones, John the Evangelist the more recent.

⁵ As is perhaps obvious, the reference is to the *Oracula Chaldaica*. Put back into circulation by Ficino, it is one of the texts Steuco uses most often to confirm his conception of perennial philosophy.

⁶ 'Invitatur ergo a tribus maximis Theologis, duobus antiquissimis, altero iunior, ad cultum, charitatem, memoriamque Dei. Apud secundum et tertium loquitur Mens ipsa: apud primum loquitur alius de ipsa. Apud omnes est nomen Patris, et ipsa Mens loquitur de Patre. Chaldaeus

One of these greatest theologians is Mercury, whose agreement with Christian doctrines is such as to cause uncontrollable weeping.⁷ Mercury states that the Father, Mind, created a God similar to himself and loved it like his own son (a reference to the *Logos teleios*, clearly taken from Lactantius).⁸ According to Steuco, these statements are in harmony with those of the Chaldaean author he had cited earlier, that is, the *Oracula Chaldaica*. Indeed, frag. 108 in des Places says that Mind sowed 'symbols' of itself in the human soul,⁹ and Mercury also uses the same word, 'to sow'. Zoroaster (the author of the *Oracula*) and other ancient theologians attributed the creation and direction of all things to Mind. In another example, Mercury gives an account of creation similar to that of Moses, as can be seen in the following quotation of *CH* I. 24: 'You have taught me many things well, oh Mind, just like I wanted.' So, the one who according to Moses separated dry earth from water is the Mind-creator, as is constantly affirmed by Anaxagoras and Plato. Therefore, Steuco concludes — employing the same succession of philosophers that had been proposed by Ficino — the Greeks learned these doctrines from Mercury (i.e. the Egyptians) and other barbarian peoples. The teaching of Philo the Jew also conforms to that of Mercury.

For Steuco, this declaration of principle obtains as a method for seeking the harmony among Greeks, barbarians, and Christian theologians in their teaching of a single 'pious theology'. This search is constituted by the simple juxtaposition of ancient theosophical writings (Chaldaean, Hermetic, Orphic) for the purpose of drawing from them the essential conclusion. In the realm of Christian theology, the authors most useful for substantiating this general view that there is only one single theology are, in addition to Plato and the Platonists, the following: Anaxagoras, who was 'rediscovered' as the one who, according to Plato's *Phaedo* (97c), first introduced the concept of a divine Mind that orders matter; Philo of Alexandria, an indispensable intermediary between Egyptian wisdom, Hebrew wisdom, and Platonism; and, on par with the Chaldaeans and the Orphics, Trismegistus:

eum vocat Mentem paternam. Novissime autem ubi multa apud Mercurium dixisset, respondit Mercurius [...]. Nulla igitur superest dubitatio, et admiratio, unde Platonici, et ante Platonem multi alii, unde Anaxagoras et quos Plato dixit, Mentem extulerint laudibus, celebraverint, nominaverint. Omnes item ante Platonem Theologi.'

⁷ Steuco often repeats this enthusiastic statement in his work when noting the agreement among the various ancient theologians.

⁸ See above, p. 45.

⁹ *Oracles Chaldaïques avec un choix de commentaires anciens*, ed. and trans. by E. des Places (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1971).

‘is, ut apparet, fuit fons Graeciae philosophiae, inde Theologiam hauserunt’ (book I, chap. X — but there are infinite other attestations).

The doctrines uniting Christianity and Hermetism are those central to Christianity itself, with the obvious exception of the incarnation of Christ. The doctrine of the Mind, Son of God (i.e. the Word that comes from God the Father), Steuco says, had already been taught by Trismegistus. The same can be said for the Christian doctrine of the creation of the world, whose similarity to the corresponding Hermetic doctrine is discussed in the eighth book of the *De perenni philosophia*. The interpretation is similar to that of an ancient supporter of this harmony, Cyril of Alexandria: the vivifying Spirit of Christian doctrine is the World Soul, which gives life to the universe; naturally, this conception will also be found elsewhere (in Patrizi, for example).

In affirming all this Steuco displays a remarkable knowledge of both the Greek *Corpus Hermeticum* and the *Asclepius*, as well as of various other sources, such as Cyril of Alexandria and the Suda. Steuco knows that according to the latter, Mercury was called ‘Trismegistus’ because he had been prompted by a divine spirit to speak about the Christian Trinity (II. XVII).¹⁰

The *Recognitio Veteris Testamenti*

Steuco devotes himself to the doctrine of the creation of the world both in the *Cosmopoeia* and in a lesser-known work, the *Recognitio Veteris Testamenti ad Hebraicam Veritatem*.¹¹

The latter work is of interest, as Steuco’s harmonizing attitude is called upon to make a more precise comparison with a specific text, namely Genesis. On fol. 6^r he offers an explanation of Genesis 1. 1, and more precisely of the word *principium* (beginning).

That the beginning must be understood as the Son of God is the opinion not only of Christian theologians but also of those of remote antiquity. Indeed, Mercury stated as clearly as possible that all things were created in the Son of God. Here are his words: ‘But

¹⁰ Elsewhere (I. XXV. 23F) Steuco rightly notes that the name ‘Trismegistus’ is an augmentative, and therefore those who believe it originated from the fact that Trismegistus was priest, king, and prophet (this had been one of the traditional interpretations of the term) are mistaken and do not know the true nature of the Greek language. Steuco, then, endowed with a superior knowledge of Greek, saw that the prefix *tris* is a simple augmentative.

¹¹ *Recognitio Veteris Testamenti ad Hebraicam veritatem per Augustinum Eugubinum Cam. Reg. S. Augustini Ordinis S. Salvatoris* (Venetiis: Aldus, 1529). Citations in the text are to this edition.

Mind, which was male and female, life and light, gave birth with its word to another Mind, a creator' [CH I. 9]. And a little later [CH I. 31]: 'Holy are you, who created all things with your word.' That by 'Word' Mercury means the Son of God is clear from other passages. This conception was later corrupted by the Platonists, as we demonstrated in our book against Platonic theology,¹² and yet I do not concede that Mercury fully understood what he was saying. His sentence is quoted by Augustine from the book he entitled 'Logos teleios', in which, in addition to other doctrines, this one is also found. Addressing his Son, he says: 'Son of the Blessed and of Good Will, whose name cannot be uttered by human mouth.'¹³

God, then, created the world (fol. 6^v). Hermes' explanation agrees with Plato's, who in the *Timaeus* (40e) speaks of 'gods who are sons of gods', that is, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which are 'Gods who are sons of God' the Father.

Mercury also says that God generated and begot this world (fol. 7^r). But we must be careful. For Mercury, Plato, and Marcus¹⁴ say that God created this world in the sense not only that it was animated but also that — in their opinion — it was god. This doctrine is utterly contrary to true philosophy and Christian truth if we do not interpret their opinion correctly. Thus when Steuco follows his texts more closely, he realizes that they must be interpreted properly (i.e. understood as he wants) if they are to say what he means.

An explanation of the description of the earth as *inanis et vacua* (Genesis 1. 2) follows (fol. 8). With this doctrine Moses meant chaos. So did Plato. Actually the text must be interpreted more carefully:

Moses wrote down not only what he heard from the mouth of God, but also what was generally believed in his age. That is why Mercury, who lived very close to his time, also

¹² This work has been lost; Th. Freudenberger (*Augustinus Steuchus und sein literarisches Lebenswerk*, Reformationsgeschichtliche Studien und Texte, 64–65 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1935), p. 393) thinks it was either lost or is an invention of Steuco.

¹³ This is the quotation taken from Quodvultdeus (considered, as usual, to be Augustine), as was seen above (p. 81). 'Interpretari autem in filio (scilicet principium) non tam christianorum, sed etiam antiquissimorum theologorum est opinio. Mercurius enim in filio dei, omnia esse condita clarissime pronuntiavit. Apud quem sic extat [...] et paulo inferius [...]. Quod autem per verbum intellegat filium dei Mercurius clarum est ex aliis locis. Hanc opinionem depravarunt postea Platonici, ut nos in libro contra theologiam Platoniorum ostendimus. Neque tamen fateor Mercurium quod diceret, penitus intellexisse. Sentit quidem et Augustinus eum, divinitatem filii intellexisse cuius sententiam citat ex eo libro quem ille inscripsit *logos teleios*. In quo praeter cetera illud quoque reperitur. Filium enim sic alloquens ait: filius benedicti atque bonae voluntatis, cuius nomen non potest humano ore narrari.'

¹⁴ The reference is to Cicero, to whom Steuco refers shortly before, calling him 'ipse Latinae linguae princeps'.

wrote down some doctrines highly consistent with those of Moses. The men of remote antiquity thus believed that the creation of the world was preceded by an eternal void, so to speak, eternal darkness, sempiternal gloom, from which God created the world [...]. Later theologians, not understanding this doctrine with the same precision, believed that this void was the confusion of elements that already existed, that is, chaos.¹⁵ (fol. 9^r)

Thus, according to the ancient theologians, the void signifies the confusion of elements which already existed in primeval chaos. This doctrine is also corroborated by Hermes in his *Pimander* (cf. *CH* III. 1). After the quotation Steuco observes:

He therefore calls that eternal nothingness 'darkness'. And as for the fact that he says that it existed in the abyss, such coincides with the account of the Sacred Scriptures: 'And the darkness was above the face of the abyss.' They differ only in their precise words and style. For Mercury, then, darkness, abyss, and chaos are the same thing. [...] And if both Moses and Mercury add the waters, all this makes no difference, since by 'waters' we understand the very same abyss that we already mentioned [...]. Mercury then adds, in no way disagreeing with Moses, that there was also a fine intelligent spirit in chaos, evidently referring to the Holy Spirit. [...] Therefore from infinite eternity there was darkness and there was God, whose spirit moved and lived in that vast eternity. That is why Mercury adds the things that by divine power existed in chaos itself.¹⁶ (fol. 9^v)

Mercury, a most ancient theologian, who lived around the time of Moses, knew (*sensit*) the Holy Spirit, since he called it 'fine intelligent spirit' (*CH* III. 1). In the book *Beresit Rabba*, that is, *maximus genesis*, this spirit is said to be the spirit of the Messiah, that is the Holy Spirit (fol. 11^v).

God addresses human beings with the well-known exhortation of Genesis (1.28): 'grow and multiply'. These words are corroborated by Mercury, and so Steuco quotes (fol. 15^r) a famous passage of the *Pimander* (*CH* I. 18), with the aim, he says,

¹⁵ 'Moyses quoque non tam quae ex ore divino excipiebat, scripsit, quam quae ferebantur passim ea tempestate. Ideo et Mercurius qui proximus illis temporibus fuit, maxime Moysi consentanea scripsit. Erat ergo apud vetustissimos homines opinio, fuisse ante mundum conditum aeternam quandam privationem, aeternam tenebram, sempiternamque caliginem, e qua mundum deus effecisset [...]. Quod postea non ita probe intelligentes posterius theologi crediderunt hanc privationem fuisse iam existentium elementorum confusionem, id est Chaos.'

¹⁶ 'Tenebras itaque appellat sempiternum illud nihil. Quod autem dicit eas fuisse in abyssu, idem est quod et sacrae recensent litterae, et tenebrae erant super faciem abyssi. Tantum in phrasi et loquendi modo differunt. Idem vero est apud Mercurium tenebrae, abyssum, et Chaos. [...] Quod autem tam Moses quam Mercurius addunt aquas, idem est. Per has enim intelligimus ipsam iam memoratam abyssum [...]. Addit postea Mercurius, nihil a Mose dissentiens, et Spiritus tenuis et intelligens existens in Chao, nimirum Spiritus Sanctus. [...] Ab infinita igitur aeternitate fuerunt tenebrae illae, fuit et deus, cuius spiritus per vastam illam aeternitatem agitabatur. Idcirco addit Mercurius quae divina virtute erant in ipso Chao.'

of convincing us that the opinions of the most ancient theologians did not differ from ours on this issue. The same can be said of man 'made in the image and likeness of God', in support of which the *Pimander* is yet again cited (*CHI*. 12).

The *Cosmopoeia*

Cosmopoeia means 'creation of the world'.¹⁷ In this work Steuco continues and expands the subject he had already treated in the previous one. His interpretive method remains substantially the same.

Moses' description of the world's creation, he says at the outset (fol. 5^r [A]), is found, one might say, in all peoples. Steuco therefore suspects that the ancients wrote numerous other works on this topic of which only fragments have been passed down to us. Iamblichus refers to other texts (*On the Mysteries* VIII. 1), and the Phoenician Philo (i.e. Philo of Byblos, frag. 2) says that Mercury Trismegistus left many volumes on nature and creation.

Regarding *hyle* (fol. 6^r [E]), philosophers after the Stoics, deceived about the word's meaning, thought it only signified mud or muddy earth. This is shown by the fact that the Greeks, based on the works of Hermes, began speaking about *hyle* and *chaos*. The *Asclepius* (chap. 14) says, 'Fuit Deus et hyle, quem Graece credimus mundum, et mundo comitabatur spiritus.' That man was created from this slime is professed by pagan philosophy, and such is likely. For *hyle* is something similar to *ilys*, that is, mud, and thus Mercury also attests that God created man from the mud of the earth, like Genesis says.

Mercury Trismegistus, Egyptian priest and philosopher, seems to have opened up the wells to the Greeks and to have filled everything with his own abundance (fol. 8^r [B]). Indeed, all of what Greek philosophy has to say about *hyle* comes from him. He was the first to mention *hyle*, *chaos*, the spirit of God, love and conflict, mind — and at this point Steuco repeats the quotation from *Asclepius* 14. It is therefore clear that all have maintained the same doctrine as Moses and that cosmology was the same everywhere in the world.

Moses is also the source for the fact that Greek theologians make everything come from night (fol. 8^r [D]). Indeed, one of the things that Moses and Mercury Trismegistus say existed *ab initio* is that which God wished to be called 'darkness'.

¹⁷ Augustini Steuchi Eugubini, *Cosmopoeia, vel de mundano opificio: Expositio trium capitum Geneseos, in quibus de creatione tractat Moses* (Venetiis, 1591). Citations in the text are to this edition.

Moses' oracle on this matter is clear. Mercury says (*CH* III. 1), 'there was a boundless darkness above the abyss' (fol. 8^v [E]). The theology of the ancient Greeks coincides entirely, without doubt, with that of the Egyptians (fol. 10^v [F]). Ovid also attests that first chaos existed and then the earth: 'ante mare et terras et, quod tegit omnia, caelum | unus erat toto naturae vultus in orbe' (*Metamorphoses* I. 5–6).

On fol. 12^r [BC] Steuco comments on the verse of Genesis according to which the Spirit of God moved above the waters. The Spirit is equated with the World Soul of the Platonic philosophers, ancient and modern. What Mercury Trismegistus has to say about this is amazing, as seen in his discourse to Aesculapius (i.e. in the above-quoted passage of *Ascl.* 14).

And in the third treatise of the *Corpus* (*CH* III. 1), Mercury says as clearly as possible with regard to the Holy Spirit: 'in the deep there was boundless darkness and water and fine intelligent spirit, all existing by divine power in chaos' (fol. 12^v [D]). This was declared by David and the pagan prophets; how comforting it is to hear how they agree with one another. Thereupon follows a quotation of Psalm 103 and a conflation of Virgil's *Aeneid* VI. 724–27 and *Georgica* IV. 221–24 (two passages with the same philosophical subject) (fol. 12^v [E]). Mercury, then, taught that 'the spirit governs and vivifies species, forms, and souls' (*Ascl.* 3–5).

On fol. 14^v [DE] Steuco identifies the Spirit of God with Wisdom. The agreement between Mercury and Moses is amazing. Mercury, a near contemporary of Moses, refers to the spirit that moves above the waters substantially with the same words as Solomon and Philo, namely 'fine intelligent spirit' (cf. *CH* III. 1). This agreement has two possible explanations: either a single divine doctrine began with the first man and was then spread over the course of centuries, or the very Spirit of which Mercury speaks penetrated his and Moses' breasts and revealed itself to everyone.

Francesco Patrizi

In Francesco Patrizi, at the end of the sixteenth century, we meet with intentions different from those of Steuco. Although his research is no less thorough, Patrizi's purpose is no longer to reconstruct a *philosophia perennis* on the exclusive basis of erudition and the absolute, although often naive, application of a harmonizing method. Instead, he wants to establish a Neoplatonic philosophical system to supplant the Aristotelianism that was growing ever stronger in Italy (partly with the aid of the Counter-Reformation). He wrote two works against Aristotelianism and in support of his conviction that, in order to institute a historically justified form of Christianity, one must draw on the most ancient wisdom. The first was the

Discussiones Peripateticae,¹⁸ the second his most famous work, the *Nova de universis philosophia*.¹⁹ In both (but especially in the latter) he seeks to demonstrate the validity of his doctrines and his anti-Aristotelianism by drawing heavily on ancient theosophies (Hermetism, Orphism, Zoroastrianism), which he considered closer to the primeval truth than the more refined doctrines of Plato and the patently irreligious ones of Aristotle.²⁰

Patrizi's Hermes belongs to the end of the sixteenth century, having benefited from more than a hundred years of philological and scholarly attention. Patrizi's attitude to the Hermetic writings is certainly not that of Ficino, who scoured them for evidence of the evolution of ancient theology, nor the enthusiastic one of Lazzarelli, who believed himself to be a new Pimander, inhabited by the revelation of Jesus Christ, nor that of the learned but naive Steuco. Patrizi approaches the Hermetic texts historically and philologically, although his philology, when compared to that of others — Casaubon, for example, only twenty years later²¹ — appears less sophisticated.

Let us now turn to examining Patrizi's numerous learned references to Hermetism, noting where they can be found in modern editions (no easy task).

¹⁸ Francisci Patritii, *Discussionum Peripateticarum tomus quattuor quibus Aristotelicae Philosophiae universa Historia atque Dogmata cum Veterum Placitis collata, eleganter et erudite declarantur* (Basileae: ad Permean Lecythum, 1581); page references are to this edition, which is remarkable for its accuracy and lack of errors (in comparison to so many Italian editions of the age). On the *Discussiones Peripateticae*, see especially Muccillo, *Platonismo Ermetismo*, pp. 73–193; M. Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathustra: Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der frühen Neuzeit*, *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten*, 42 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998), pp. 311–17; C. Vasoli, “Sophismata putida”: la critica patriziana alla dottrina peripatetica dell'eternità e immutabilità del cielo, in *Francesco Patrizi filosofo platonico nel crepuscolo del Rinascimento*, ed. by P. Castelli, Pubblicazioni dell'Università di Ferrara, 8 (Florence: Olschki, 2002), pp. 167–80; Vasoli, ‘Note su tre teologie platoniche: Ficino, Steuco e Patrizi’, *Rinascimento*, 2nd series, 48 (2008), 81–100.

¹⁹ Francisci Patritii, *Nova de universis Philosophia* (Ferrariae: Ex Typographia Benedicti Mammarelli, 1591); page references in the text are to this edition.

²⁰ The structure of this work by Patrizi, which has enjoyed massive attention from scholars in recent decades, is carefully examined by M. Muccillo, ‘Marsilio Ficino e Francesco Patrizi da Cherso’, in *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, ed. by G. C. Garfagnini, Studi e Documenti, II, Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento. Studi e Testi, 15 (Florence: Olschki, 1986), pp. 615–79 (pp. 648–75). We have made use of the immense bibliography exclusively in relation to our subject.

²¹ See pp. 276–85.

The *Discussiones Peripateticae*

The first book of the second volume of the *Discussiones Peripateticae* is devoted to discovering the *Aristotelis cum veteribus in Dialecticis concordia*. On p. 181 Patrizi notes that if, as Diogenes Laertius says (*Vitae Philosophorum* III. 48), Zeno of Elea was the first to write philosophical dialogues, such applies only to Greek writers. Much more ancient are the dialogues of Hermes Trismegistus and his pupil, Asclepius. The second book of the second volume, *Concordiam eorum quae ad Entis scientiam attinent, comprehendens*, takes up the question in earnest, listing all the concepts that philosophers predating Aristotle had already discovered before him. The point is to redefine the Stagirite's importance both on the historical plane and with regard to his thought. We shall follow along with reference to Hermes.

p. 198, 'Ens'. Hermes says at the beginning of the *Pimander* (I. 1 and 3) that he was possessed with the fervour to know the *entia* (*ta onta*, i.e. reality: Patrizi understands the term according to the meaning generally assigned it in his age). In support Patrizi mentions *CH V*, the *Crater* (*CH IV*), the *Sermo universalis* (i.e. the *logos catholicos* = *CH II*), and the *Sermo sacer* (*CH III*), where God is referred to as *principium*.

p. 200, 'Unum'. On this point Patrizi lists a few passages in which Hermes — before Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus — exalts the monad as 'principle and root' (*CH IV. 10*).

'Substantia'. It is mentioned in the dialogue entitled *Mens* (i.e. *CH XI. 2–3*) and in the sixth treatise (see *CH VI. 4*).

'Quantitas. Qualitas'. These are discussed in the *Clavis* (*CH X. 3*) and in the *Asclepius* (chap. 7).

'Locus. Tempus'. In *CH II* (passim) and in *Asclepius* (chap. 12). Also in the treatise in which Mind talks to Asclepius (*CH XI. 2*).

p. 201, 'Idem. Alterum'. These should be understood as categories. Hermes mentions them when he is addressed by Mind (*CH XI. 2*) and in the treatise *de mente communi* (*CH XII*), namely in chapter 14. For his part, Plotinus wrote three treatises to support Plato's five *genera* and to confute Aristotle's ten categories.

'Status. Motus'. Hermes speaks of them in *Clave* (*CH X. 11 and 14*) *et in sermone catholico* (i.e. in the *sermo universalis* mentioned above: see *CH II. 8*).

p. 203, 'Contrarietas'. Mercury speaks of it in *Clave* (*CH X. 10*) and in *catholico sermone* (*CH II. 7*).

'Genus. Species'. Hermes in the *Sermo catholicus* (*CH II. 16*) and in the *Asclepius* (chap. 5).

'Differentia. Proprium. Accidens'. Hermes in *libello ultimo* (CH XIV. 3²²) and in the *Asclepius* (chap. 7).

p. 204, 'Totum. Partes'. The concept of *totum* is mentioned in *Clave* (CH x. 6), that of parts in CH VI. 4.

'Actus. Potentia'. Trismegistus speaks of act at the beginning of the *Sacred Discourse* (CH III. 1), and about power immediately thereafter. Both concepts are mentioned in *libello de Mente communi* (CH XII. 8).

p. 205, 'Verum. Falsum'. Here Patrizi supplies information that would require proper philological verification, namely that Hermes speaks at length about true and false in a dialogue (*sermo*) that he himself claims to have brought to Italy from a voyage to Cyprus.²³ He will make it known, inter alia, in his *sapientiae Thesaurus*, that is, in the section entitled *Hermes Trismegistus* of the *Nova de universis philosophia*, evidently already conceived by Patrizi when he was writing his *Discussiones Peripateticae*.

pp. 205–06, 'Beginning and the various kinds of cause'. Many Hermetic passages mention them. The *Crater* (CH IV. 10) mentions beginning; Mercury discusses final cause in the same treatise (CH IV. 19), and much better than Aristotle.

p. 207, 'Elementa'. Hermes, many centuries before Empedocles, speaks of them in the *Poemander* (CH I. 8 and 10) and in *Mente communi* (CH XII. 12).

'Necessitas'. Mercury in *Sacro* (i.e. in CH III. 1), but Patrizi's text does not correspond to that of Nock-Festugière.

The subject of the third book of the second volume is different. Patrizi seeks to show the *Dogmatum Theologicorum concordia* between Hermes and the other philosophers who followed him. Hermes Trismegistus, he observes (p. 210), had also attributed wisdom to God in *sermone Mentis* (CH XI. 2), and in the *Crater* he had said that God feels no envy (IV. 3). God's creation of the world is the subject of many passages in the *Poemander*, in the *Virgo mundi* (i.e. the treatise now known as *Kore Kosmou*), and in other *libelli*, including the *Crater* (IV. 1). On p. 211 Patrizi emphasizes that in the *Sermo catholicus* (II. 15) Hermes also said that God is goodness, and that he would repeat it twice more in chap. 16 of the same treatise. He said it in *sermone sacro* (III. 1: the quotation does not correspond to the edition of Nock and Festugière) and thus before Plato's *Republic* and *Timaeus*. God is the

²² If this 'last book' is treatise XIV of the *Corpus*, this means that Patrizi did not know (or did not use) CH XVI, published first by Lazzarelli. Nevertheless it is found in Turnebus's 1554 edition.

²³ The details of this are unknown.

telos, as Hermes says in his *Sacred Discourse* (III. 1);²⁴ he is intelligible, as is said *in catholico* (II. 5); he is mind, as is attested by the *Sacred Discourse* (III. 1) and the *Catholicus* (quotation from II. 5: the text does not correspond to the edition of Nock and Festugière); he is the saviour (p. 213), as treatise V says (actually II. 12). Happiness is present in God *essentialiter*, as said *in sermone mentis* (the quotation is a mixture of XI. 2 and 3). He is *energeia*, as is said in the *Poemander* (I. 6 and 9: the quotation is wrong; Patrizi says (I. 9) *zoe kai physis*, whereas the text of Nock and Festugière reads *zoe kai phos*). He is *ratio*, as the fifth treatise attests (actually the quotation is taken from *CH* II. 12). He is eternally in motion, as is attested in the *Poemander* (I. 11) and the treatise *de resurrectione* (*CH* XIII. 6). The conclusion is that ‘if these doctrines are theologically acceptable, they nevertheless do not belong to Aristotle alone but are in agreement with ancient philosophies’.

p. 215. In the *Parva Moralia* Aristotle speaks of the order of the world, quoting Homer (*Iliad* II. 204). But Mercury had already said the same thing *in sacro* (*CH* III. 3 and III. 4).

p. 220. God is only visible to the mind, as said in *De mundo* (399a 30–31), falsely attributed to Aristotle and translated into Latin by Apuleius (30. 357).²⁵ But this had already been said in *De mundo* (37. 370) and earlier by Hermes (*CH* v. 10).

The fourth book of volume two is dedicated to demonstrating the *physicorum dogmatum concordiam*. God, then, is the final cause (p. 240), as Hermes had said in a passage *in Clave* (*CH* X. 10), as well as in an earlier one (X. 7) and in the conclusion (X. 11–12: Patrizi’s text does not accord with that of Nock-Festugière here, either). Soul and the divine spirit depend from one lone beginning (*CH* X. 14). Patrizi therefore says (p. 242) that this spirit is the one in which, according to Hermes, the soul is found and that, in its turn, is found in the body (cf. *CH* X. 13). And perhaps it is the one that Moses said moved above the waters and which Vergil says *intus alit* (i.e. nourishes within) the body of the world (see *Aen.* VI. 726).

p. 248. The void is mentioned, about which Hermes speaks *in catholico* (quotation from *CH* II. 10, which does not accord with the text of the modern edition).

²⁴ A passage repeated on p. 212, to demonstrate that God is necessity.

²⁵ I think that Patrizi is not quoting the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Peri kosmou*, but rather the Latin translation of Apuleius: see 30. 357.

Hermetism in the *Nova de universis philosophia*

The attention given to Hermetism in the *Discussiones Peripateticae* continues in the *Nova de universis philosophia*.

The doctrine of light, which had been proposed and demonstrated by Patrizi especially with the aid of the *Oracula Chaldaica*,²⁶ also finds support — he says — in Hermetic theosophy. Philo (*De opificio mundi* 31), for example, had called the great light which descends from the light of the Word of God *panaugia quasi omni-lucentia* (an essential term for Patrizi, who uses it as a title for this part of his work). But, Patrizi claims, Hermes Trismegistus had also used the image of light in the *Poemander* (*CH* I. 4 and 6), and so, on the basis of the judgement of Zoroaster, Philo, and Hermes, he can state that ‘all the lights of the lower world derive from heavenly light’ (*Panaugia*, liber nonus, *De lumine incorporeo*, p. 21^{r-v}).

Regarding the concept of beginning, Hermes says (*CH* IV. 10)²⁷ that nothing exists without a beginning, and that the beginning can exist from nothing but itself. In this he was followed by Plato (*Phaedr.* 245c) (*Panarchia*, liber quartus, *quid principium*, p. 7^v).

In confirmation of the monad spoken of by Zoroaster, Hermes had also stated that ‘monas enim omnium extitit principium et radix’ (*Panarchia*, liber sextus, *Unum, omnis multitudinis, esse principium*, p. 10^v). In Zoroaster and Hermes, ‘illud [scl. *unum*] monas appellatur, nobis vero doctrinae clarioris gratia melius visum, unum illud hanc vocare unitatem’, that is, the *unitas* par excellence that is God. And later Hermes says (*CH* X. 14): ‘unum vero manens stat, et non movetur’. And since he is everywhere, nothing is outside of him and he is outside of nothing (*IX*. 9) (p. 16^r).

In *Panarchia*, liber nonus, *De uno trino principio* (p. 18^{r-v}) Patrizi states that, according to Hermes (*CH* IV. 10), the monad, being the beginning and root, is everywhere and, as such, it generates every number. The problem dealt with there is whether the first principle is Mind, as Hermes believes, or not. For Zoroaster never calls the Father by that name (pp. 18^v, II col.–19^r). Patrizi collects Hermetic witnesses in demonstration of his thesis that Mind is different from the Father: ‘mens vero Pater Deus’ (*CH* I. 6),²⁸ ‘omnium enim Dominus, et pater, et Deus, et fons, et vita, et potentia, et lux, et mens, et spiritus’ (frag. 23 Nock-Festugière, from

²⁶ On which see Moreschini, ‘Gli *Oracula Chaldaica* nel Rinascimento italiano’.

²⁷ This statement is also repeated in *Panarchia*, liber nonus, *De uno trino principio*, p. 18.

²⁸ The distinction between the Father and the Mind is also explained in *Panarchias*, liber decimus octavus, *de mentibus Dei ministris*.

Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Iul.* I. 48; see p. 87). These passages indicate that Hermes understood three hypostases, as does the following (which is also taken from the same passage of Cyril):

there was only one intellectual light, which preceded intellectual light and was always luminous mind, and its union was nothing other than the spirit that embraces all things, which is always in itself and which embraces every thing with its mind, its light, and its spirit.

Patrizi explains that, since the Father said 'let there be light' (Genesis 1. 3), he is before light. The first light, then, is the Father, and the second light is the Son, and the union of the Son with the Father is the Spirit, which contains all things. Patrizi quotes even more passages with regard to the two hypostases: 'the light-giving word who comes from mind is the Son of God' (*CH* I. 6), and 'it is the offspring, the perfect, generated, genuine Son' (I. 46 = frag. 27 Nock-Festugière, from Cyril; see p. 86). The Son in no way differs from the Father, and their union is life (*CH* I. 6), that union which in the preceding passage he had said was the Spirit. With regard to the Spirit he says: 'God, being androgyne and existing as life and light, gave birth with his Word to a second Mind, a craftsman, who, being of fire and spirit, created' (I. 9). This creator is the Mind, consubstantial with the Word.²⁹ This is what the Hermetic text says: 'From the elements that weigh downwards, the Logos of God leapt straight up to the pure craftwork of nature and united with the craftsman-mind (for the Word was of the same substance)' (I. 10). Therefore, if the Mind-creator is consubstantial with the Word, and the Word is not different from the Father, obviously the Mind-creator is also not different from the Father and is consubstantial with him. And Hermes calls this Mind 'craftsman' or 'creator' because it created the world without an intermediary, so to speak (this is how I understand the expression *quasi proxime*). Moreover, Hermes says with regard to the Mind that God, being spirit and fire, 'created seven governors; they encompass the sensible world in circles' (I. 9). The Mind-creator, which embraces the planetary circles, was with the Logos (I. 11); actually, Hermes attributes the creation of the world to the Word: 'from the light a holy Word mounted upon nature' (I. 5). And again: 'the nature of the intelligent (*noerou*) Word is that of a generator and creator (frag. 27 Nock-Festugière, from Cyril I. 46; see p. 86); 'indeed, the Word that proceeds from the Mind, being most perfect, descended into the second nature, which is generative water, and impregnated the water' (I. 46 = frag. 27, from Cyril; see p. 86). But the Father is also a creator, although he does not create with his hands, of course,

²⁹ See also *CH* I. 11, called *Mens opifex* (*Panarchia*, liber decimusoctavus, *de mentibus Dei ministris*, p. 40').

but with the Logos, which is, so to speak, his instrument (*CH* IV. 1). All these divine passages clearly manifest the ineffable Trinity, creator and lord. They come from the Chaldaean (i.e. Zoroaster; the passages of the *Oracula Chaldaica* pertaining to this interpretation have not been taken into consideration here) and the Egyptian, both very ancient wise men preceding Moses.

According to Patrizi, neither Zoroaster nor Hermes thinks that the first god — the Father, for Christians — is called 'Mind'. Christians, for their part, also use 'Mind' to refer to the Son. This is stated in *Panarchia*, liber nonus, *De uno trino principio* (p. 18^v). Nevertheless Hermetic theosophy sometimes clashes with this conception — a fact that Patrizi could not avoid. At the beginning of the sixteenth book of the *Panarchia* (p. 33^v), he admits that Hermes often calls God the Father 'Mind' (which happens in the *Poemander* I. 6). Yet thereafter Hermes never repeats this claim, as can be seen in the treatises *de Mente communi* (*CH* XII) and *de intellectione* (*CH* IX). In none of these passages, nor in others, did he explain what Mind was, nor did he set forth its powers or actions or divide them into kinds. He was content to name only three Minds, and to give an account of the creation of the world made by them. Nor does Moses, who came immediately after Hermes, ever mention the Mind in the Pentateuch. The prophets never speak of mind either, except for the mind of man.

Referring to the Hermetic doctrine of beginning (*principium*) (which is presented again in *Panarchia*, liber quintodecimus, *De intellectu*, p. 33^r), it is repeated that 'all things depend from one beginning, but the beginning depends from the One and Only, and the beginning moves so that it can again become a beginning; only the One, however, stands still and does not move' (*CH* X. 14). This means that everything depends from the first principle. The second principle depends from that unique principle: it moves because it lives and is life and because it is Mind and understands. But living and understanding are movement or are in movement. So this second principle, which is the first Mind, Zoroaster calls 'power', 'force', and 'mind' of the Father; Hermes calls it Mind, Word, Son of God, and a beginning that moves so that it will again be a beginning.

In *Panarchia*, liber sextusdecimus, *an Deus Pater sit intellectus* (p. 35^v) Patrizi notes that Hermes, after repeating that 'Mind is God the Father' and saying that 'that light said: I am Mind, your God' (*CH* I. 6), points out that 'neither can God exist without making the Good' (*CH* XI. 17), and that 'God made all things so that through them all you might look on him. This is the goodness of god, this is his excellence: that he is visible through all things' (*CH* XI. 22). Hermes, then, clearly had no fear of saying these things about God the Father. It follows (p. 40^r, I col.) that Hermes means that the Father transmits everything to the second Mind

through the first Mind, which is consubstantial with him, since the second Mind is also consubstantial with the Word and the Father.

Another section of the *Panarchia* is devoted to the doctrine that all things are in God. Already in *Panarchia*, liber septimus, *an in uno sint omnia*, p. 13^v, Patrizi had quoted *CH* v. 9: (in Latin translation) ‘est ipse et entia et non entia. Entia quidem fecit manifesta (*ephanerose*)’; ‘non entia vero habet in se ipso’. This is confirmed by the apostle, who ‘refers to things that do not exist as if they were things that exist’.³⁰ Therefore the next passage of the *Panarchia* (liber vigesimus, *Divinitas, an sit ubique, an nullibi, an alicubi*, p. 43^v) adduces Hermes’ claim that everything that exists is in God, and that ‘god holds within him the things that are; none are outside of him; and he is outside of none’ (*CH* ix. 9). This statement of Hermes is in agreement, then, with that of Acts 17. 28 or perhaps better, John 1. 3: ‘for the truth’, Patrizi concludes, ‘agrees with the truth, and there is only one truth of a thing if this thing (i.e. Christian and Hermetic truth) is one.’ In support of this doctrine Patrizi quotes another series of Hermetic passages: ‘The one who makes exists in all things’ (*CH* xi. 6), and hence ‘God is this very thing, the universe itself. And there is nothing in the universe that is not God himself’ (an imprecise quotation of *CH* v. 9). ‘Working alone, he is in his work eternally since he is what he makes’ (*CH* xi. 14).³¹ Never, Patrizi observes, does the good cease being good; neither does the will ever cease, nor the necessity of operating. Thus God never ceases working. And since God operates with his very own being and he is his own being, he is the very thing he makes. It follows that, although he is perpetually at work, nevertheless he never leaves himself, because he is what he makes. The text continues (II col.): ‘And he contains all things and preserves all that exists’ (*CH* ii. 12); the verb *chorein* means ‘to contain’ and ‘to enter into’, and God, when entering into all things, necessarily preserves them all. If he were separated from things, they would doubtlessly collapse into nothing (*CH* xi. 14). Indeed, as the above-quoted passage says, ‘God made all things so that through them all you might look on him. This is the goodness of God, this is his excellence: that he is visible through all things’ (*CH* xi. 22). These statements of Hermes are also corroborated by Dionysius the Areopagite.

The heat and fire spoken of by Zoroaster are considered in the fifth book of the *Pancosmia* (*De primario calore*, p. 77^r, I col.). By heat and fire Zoroaster might

³⁰ The quotation is uncertain and probably cited from memory; Patrizi might have Romans 1. 25 in mind.

³¹ In a summary of *CH* v. 7, employed in an anti-Aristotelian passage (*Panarchia*, liber vigesimus primus, *de sempiternitate*, p. 46^r), the world is said to have been created as a result of the deliberation and will of the Father.

mean the God that Hermes called 'god of fire and spirit' (*CH* I. 9), or perhaps the spirit that Moses said in the beginning moved above the waters, clearly portraying them in all forms. Entering in everywhere, it heats and nourishes all things, and so Hermes said that all animate things need it (*CH* XVI. 15, but the Greek text does not seem to say exactly what Patrizi means). This is what Democritus called the World Soul, and what according to the Stoics is the spirit of the world that runs through and vivifies everything. Vergil also sung about it in two similar verses: *Aeneid* VI. 724–32 and *Georgica* IV. 221–27.

Patrizi, like Candale, also considers the problem of how to make theological sense of the theory of *aion*, which we encountered in the *Asclepius*. He does not take it from this Latin treatise, though, which in general does not have much authority in his eyes, but from the eleventh treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, for which he provides a kind of commentary in *Panarchia*, liber vigesimus primus, *de sempiternitate* (pp. 45^{v32}–46^v). 'God is *aion*, the world, time, generation. God makes *aion*, *aion* makes the world, the world makes time, time makes generation' (*CH* XI. 2). Heaven and earth are in the world, the world is in *aion*, and thus in God. What this God is, Hermes explains: 'The essence [Patrizi translates *essentia*] of God (so to speak) is the good, the beautiful, happiness,³² wisdom; the essence of *aion* is identity [Candale's *mesmesse*, see p. 226]; of the world, order; of time, change; of generation, life and death' (XI. 2). 'God is the soul of *aion*; *aion* is the soul of the world; heaven is the soul of earth' (XI. 4). From these essences and powers come the following energies and effects: 'The energy (*energeia*) of God is Mind and soul; the energy of *aion* is permanence and immortality; of the world, recurrence and counter-recurrence (*anapocatastasis*); of time, increase and decrease; of generation, quality' (XI. 2). According to the Greeks *aion* means *aei on*, according to the Latins *sempiternitas*, *aeternitas*, *aevum*.

Hermes says (*Ascl.* 8) that necessity follows the will of God. Quite correctly, then, he says that God created all things according to his will (*CH* V. 7) and that all things that exist depend from it (*CH* X. 14). Thus the *Potentia Patris* celebrated by Zoroaster corresponds to the *Patris Filius* spoken of by Hermes (*Panarchia*, liber octavus, *an ab uno fuerint, et sint, omnia*, p. 16).

At the end of the twenty-second book of the *Panarchia* (*de rerum creatione*, pp. 47^v, II col.–48^r), Patrizi takes up the question of matter. It was created — as Hermes says (*CH* XI. 22) and as Christian doctrine confirms. A series of rapid chains of

³² Page '43' in Patrizi's edition — a typographical error.

³³ Patrizi notes (p. 46^v, II col.) that Aristotle too had said this, 'sed quasi balbutiens'.

reasoning at the end of p. 48^r, I col. restates the role that the goodness of the Father played in the creation of the various *entia* and of matter itself. And since he is Father he is also beginning, and, as such, he is the cause of things. Since he is the cause of things, he is omnipotent. Furthermore, these two names, 'good' and 'God', Hermes says, are reserved for God alone. And although all pronounce these names, nonetheless not all understand them. In this regard, in order to support the doctrine of God's goodness, his creation, and his being known, Patrizi makes reference to a series of Hermetic quotations in the course of p. 48^r, II col., namely *CH* II. 16, X. 3, XIV. 9, XI. 17, X. 2, X. 4, X. 15, and XI. 22. The world, then, was created by the will of the Father, as is said in *CH* V. 7 (*Panarchia*, liber vigesimus primus, *de sempiternitate*, p. 46^{r-v}).

Among the various created things are the *entia* (which would seem to be material entities, the Empyrean, and the world above). No Hermetic passages deal with this topic exclusively, Patrizi observes. Nevertheless, since Iamblichus tells us (*On the Mysteries* VIII. 2) that Hermes wrote one hundred books on the Empyrean gods, another hundred on the ethereal gods, and one thousand books on the heavenly gods, one could conclude that Hermes knew the existence of these three essences (*Pancosmias*, liber septimus, *De mundo empyreo*, p. 81^v).

At the end of the third book of the *Pampsychia* (*quotuplex sit animus*, p. 53^v) Patrizi notes that the soul, according to Hermes, is threefold — divine, human, and irrational — although he (Hermes) did not explain clearly how the soul of God is to be understood. Indeed, that term 'soul' could indicate all the souls that are above the world, that is, all the heavenly beings; the souls of the heavens and the stars, which are *intramundani*; and finally the World Soul — in short, everything but God himself. This is maintained by many Greek philosophers, and especially by Hermes in the *Clavis* (*CH* X. 7):

In the *General Discourses* (*in genericis*) did you not hear that all the souls whirled about in all the cosmos — portioned out, as it were — come from the one soul of the all?

Patrizi continues this discussion in the fourth book of the same treatise (*an mundus sit animatus*, p. 55^r). He first quotes passages from Plato relating to the World Soul, then passages taken from Zoroaster, and finally some from Hermes: first the passage from the *Clavis* we have just quoted, then *CH* XI. 4 (with a corrupt text that is difficult to translate). This statement of Hermes was adopted by the most ancient Greek theologian, Orpheus, as was attested by Iamblichus (whose testimony is found in Stobaeus³⁴):

³⁴ See Stobaei, *Anthologium*, I. 376. 1–6 Wachsmuth-Hense.

It certainly seems that Orpheus himself, apart from all the others, thinks that one lone soul exists, from which numerous differentiations come and many intermediary insufflations (*epipnoiai*) arrive at particular souls, originating in the general soul.

On the basis of what the most illustrious and ancient wise men said (i.e. Zoroaster, Hermes, and, among the Greeks, Orpheus, Pythagoras, the Pythagoreans, and Plato), it can then be deduced that a most ancient doctrine was passed down according to which the world has a soul. This was opposed by two ridiculous philosophers (if they can even be called such), Leucippus and Epicurus, who maintained that the world was utterly lacking in soul, thus making it into some kind of cadaver. An intermediate position was taken by Aristotle, who maintained that the world was the most beautiful of all things but that it was only half animate, half inanimate. This distinction between rational and irrational soul, Patrizi continues (*Pampsychia*, liber quintus, *De animis irrationalibus*, p. 57^r, I col.), is unacceptable. For all souls derive from the World Soul, as Hermes taught.

Finally, in the section devoted to Hermetic physics, Patrizi reports simple observations, taken from the *Asclepius* (chaps 2–4), on the location of ether, fire, and air in the world (*Pancosmia*, liber vigesimus secundus. *De ignis elemento*, p. 117^v). In addition, from the *Poemander* (CH I. 11) he draws information on the separation of earth from water (see *Pancosmia*, liber trigesimus primus, *De proprio terrae loco*, pp. 148^v–149^v). He also notes (*Pancosmia*, liber duodecimus, *De coelorum numero*, p. 91^r, I col.) that the planets are animate and called governors of the world by Hermes (CH I. 9).

The Edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum*

In the preface to his edition of the Hermetic fragments, Patrizi explains that his work is the result of an enthusiasm roused in him in his youth, when, reading these texts, he realized that they were substantially akin to the works of Plato ('quod videretur eiusdem cum Platonica esse farinae'). As a result of that youthful enthusiasm, which at any rate endured over the years, Patrizi decided to undertake a new edition to correct the errors of earlier ones. As was customary in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century printed editions (and perhaps later ones as well), the edition proper is accompanied by a disquisition on Hermes and his historical context (Francisci Patritii, *Hermes Trismegistus*). In this essay Patrizi has certainly expanded the range of the sources. Their number includes not only those used by modern scholars (such as Diodorus Siculus, Iamblichus, and Stobaeus), but also others that had hitherto been seldom utilized (for example the chronological studies of Eusebius). In order to make them accord with one another and interpret

them, however, Patrizi often brings explanations to bear that now appear to us fantastical. He begins (fol. 1^v) by observing that

Hermes Trismegistus was a very great man among the Egyptians, and his fame lasted down to our own times, when Johannes Goropius Becanus had the audacity to claim that he had never even existed. Goropius's reasoning is essentially based on his interpretation of the name Theut, whose etymology, in his opinion, must be traced back to his own *Cimmeria lingua*, that is, to Dutch, in which *Heet* and *hoot* mean 'head'.³⁵

Patrizi lingers a moment to refute this interpretation. Then he substantiates why the name of Hermes, which belonged to a man, became the name of a god, explaining that it was customary in both Greek and Egyptian antiquity for men to be worshipped as gods. His interest in Egypt, typical of his century, encourages Patrizi to make full use of a new source: Diodorus Siculus. In the precious section devoted to Egypt in the first book of his *Bibliotheca* (I. 13), the Greek historian reports that Osiris and Isis were brother and sister, children of Saturn the Younger, and also husband and wife (fol. 1^v, I.col.).³⁶ Hermes was their secretary (*a consiliis*) (see Diodorus, *Bibliotheca* I. 16. 2: Osiris took Mercury with him as *hierogrammateus* and made use of his counsel) and teacher in many subjects. Furthermore, Sanchuniathon of Berytus, who lived shortly after Moses, wrote that he who among the Phoenicians had been called Thaantus was instead Thoot or Thoyt for the Egyptians. He was Saturn's scribe, and he, too, was included among the gods. He discovered the letters of the alphabet and was the first to make many observations on how to honour the gods, as well as on sacred rites, astrology, music, and nature. He also taught the art of wrestling, of choruses, and the use of the lyre, and to the Greeks he taught eloquence. For this reason he was called Hermes. Such is Diodorus's account.

Cicero, Clement, Arnobius,³⁷ and others, however, speak of five Hermes, of whom they say two were Egyptian. One was the son of Nilus, whose name the Egyptians regarded with horror and feared to utter. The other was the one who had killed the monster Argus in Greece and then fled to Egypt, where he taught the Egyptians letters and gave them their laws. On the basis of the ancient evidence, it

³⁵ Actually Goropius, like everyone else, had written his treatise in Latin. On Goropius's claims, which indicate the rise, in the late sixteenth century, of the first doubts about Hermes' authenticity, see in brief Muccillo, *Platonismo, Ermetismo*, p. 43 n. 100.

³⁶ Cronos — Diodorus says — became King of Egypt and, having wed his sister Rhea, begot Osiris and Isis. Osiris married Isis and succeeded Cronos to the throne of Egypt (*Bibliotheca* I. 13 and also I. 17. 3).

³⁷ A reference to the famous passage of *De natura deorum* III. 22. 56, used earlier by Lactantius. See also Clemens Alexandrinus, *Stromata* VI. 4. 35–37; Arnobius, *Adversus nationes* IV. 14.

is unclear if the Hermes who was the secretary of Isis and Osiris was also Argus's killer. But if we are to believe Diodorus and many others, Orpheus was the first of the Greeks to bring back home the letters of the alphabet that had been discovered among the Egyptians. We must attribute the invention of letters not to the Mercury who killed Argus, but to Theut the Egyptian, as was claimed by Plato, a person worthy of trust. It is uncertain, however, if this Theuth or Hermes who invented writing should be identified with Hermes Trismegistus. On the other hand, it is certain that he lived in the time of Isis and Osiris, since Isis, as Diodorus attests, wrote on a column of her tomb that she had been educated by Hermes (a quotation of Diodorus, *Bibliotheca* I. 27. 4 follows). And in the sacred book of Hermes, containing the conversation between Isis and her son Horus (this is the Hermetic text generally called *Kore Kosmou*), Hermes is frequently named and his words are quoted. It calls him 'Mind of the cosmos' (chaps 26, 42), and it imagines that at some point in the past the God who rules the cosmos (chap. 9) spoke with Hermes, called him 'soul of his soul' (chap. 26), and attributed to him the creation of men (chaps 29–30, 43–46). Furthermore, it says 'the father and guide of everyone's counsel, Hermes Trismegistus'. This suggests that the Hermes who had been Isis's secretary was Trismegistus (II col.). But the *Asclepius* seems to claim that Hermes Trismegistus was not Isis's advisor. For it says, 'And Hermes, whose family name I bear, does he not dwell in his native city that was named for him, where mortals come from all around for his aid and protection?' (chap. 37).³⁸ Moreover, throughout that dialogue — just as in the *Pimander*, in the *Catholicus*, in the *Clavis*, and in all the others — the name of Trismegistus is given as author and interlocutor, and it is Trismegistus who speaks these words. Thus this Hermes Trismegistus is different from the one who was Isis's advisor and the discoverer of writing. In conclusion, the Trismegistus whom Goropius says did not exist, and whom many great men considered to be a single person, we, Patrizi says, distinguish as two individuals, both having the same name and cognomen, the one a grandson of the other. Augustine also says this in the eighth book of the *De civitate Dei* (VIII. 26; see also XVIII. 39), and mention of both the grandfather and the grandson is made in many other places. But it is understandable that, having the same first and last name, they were believed to be a single person. Following Diodorus, it seems that the Elder lived in the time of Isis, as also appears from Hermes' *Sermo sacer* and from Sanchuniathon, who says that Hermes was Saturn's scribe. Now, Saturn was the father of Osiris, who, as the chronographers write, was Chameseneus, or son of Ham, who

³⁸ 'Hermes, cuius avitum mihi nomen est, nonne in sibi cognomine patria consistens omnes mortales undique venientes adiuvat atque conservat?'

was called 'Saturn the Younger'. Thus Isis's epitaph says, 'I am the oldest daughter of the god Saturn the Younger.' Diodorus's text (*Bibliotheca* I. 27. 4) follows. The same also seems deducible from the *Liber sacer*, and more precisely from the name *Chamephes*. There the following is written (*Kore Kosmou* 32):

Pay attention, son Horus. For you are now hearing a secret contemplation, which my ancestor Chamephes heard from Hermes, who wrote *commentaria* about everything, and from Chameph, the progenitor of us all.

But since Horus was the son of Osiris, Osiris of Chus, and Chus of Ham (i.e. Chamephes), Ham was the great-grandfather of Horus, and the father of Chamephes (fol. 2^v, I col.), and thus Noah was Saturn the Elder. Hermes had heard his *sermones*, and Chamephes (i.e. Saturn the Younger), who as it seems was Chus, the son of Ham, heard them from Hermes. Thus this first Hermes seems to have been the teacher of Ham or Chus and a student of Noah. Moreover, not far from the beginning of the same *Liber sacer* (cf. *Kore Kosmou* 6) the following is found:

But his successor was Tat, both his son and a student of these doctrines, and not much later Asclepius, Imuthes, Ephestobulus, and others.

And then, towards the end (*Exc. Stob.* XXVI. 9):³⁹

The father and guide of everyone's counsel was Hermes Trismegistus, of medicine Asclepius, son of Vulcan, of force and hardiness Osiris. After all of them, you, son. Of philosophy it was Arnebasenesis, of poetry, then, Asclepius, son of Imuthes.

On the basis of the first of these passages, one might doubt our claim that two Hermes existed, great-grandfather and grandson, since it would seem that the Elder was the father of Tat and the teacher of Asclepius, which would not seem to correspond to the chronology. But the second passage quoted above, as well as another, taken from the end of the *Asclepius*, resolve the difficulty. The second passage speaks of not only one Asclepius, but of two: the one a son of Vulcan, founder of medicine, the other a son of Imuthes and the discoverer of poetry. Both lived in the age of Isis and Osiris. The *Asclepius*, for its part, says, 'Take your ancestor, for example: he was the first to discover medicine, Asclepius. They dedicated a temple to him on the Libyan mountain' (chap. 37). This passage indicates that the Asclepius who discovered medicine was the ancestor of the younger Asclepius, and that the ancestor, already dead, had a temple consecrated to him. Then the text continues: 'And Hermes, whose family name I bear, does he not dwell in his native city that

³⁹ The words 'towards the end' seem to mean that Patrizi added *Excerptum Stobaei* XXVI to the end of the *Kore Kosmou*.

was named for him, where mortals come from all around for his aid and protection?' Apparently he helps them in the same way as Asclepius (who had already died) helped them: the latter on the Libyan mountain, the former in the fatherland that bears his very name, that is, Hermoupolis. Indeed, Diodorus tells us⁴⁰ that many cities are named after the gods to whom they were dedicated: (II col.) Diospolis to Jupiter, Heliopolis to the sun, Hermoupolis to Hermes, Panopolis to Pan, and many others. And with regard to Isis, who had already died, he writes, 'And Isis, wife of Osiris: we know how much good she can do when well disposed, when angered how much harm!' Moreover: 'Whence it happens that these are called holy animals by the Egyptians, who throughout their cities worship the souls of those deified while alive' (*Asclepius* 37).

So it can be concluded that Isis, Hermes, and Asclepius were contemporaries, and that they were already dead by the time of the younger Asclepius and Hermes. Thus, if Hermes and Asclepius preserved the names of their ancestors, it should not seem strange if the son of the first Hermes was called Tat, and that this was also the name of the son of the second Hermes, grandson of the first Hermes. For this kind of thing happens in Roman and Greek families and in those of other peoples as well, even in our own times.⁴¹

It is no wonder that both were called 'Trismegistus' on account of their extraordinary wisdom. Actually, Hermes did not get that name from being the first to talk about the Trinity, or because he was a priest, a king, and a philosopher.⁴² Rather he was called 'Trismegistus' after the manner of the Greek and Latin expression *terque quaterque beati* (it seems also to be a common usage of modern French to prefix words with *ter*, or three), and thus the Younger also took his name from the Elder.

At any rate, both flourished before Moses and the two Pharaohs coeval with him, Achoris and Chencres. For Achoris was a contemporary of Osiris, who was killed by his brother Typho 568 years after the flood. Then 149 years passed until Moses' birth, which took place 717 years after the flood. But Eusebius reports that Tat

⁴⁰ *Bibliotheca* I. 15: 'Osiris founded a city in the Thebaid of Egypt with one hundred gates which the men of his time called by the name of his mother, whereas later generations called it Diospolis.'

⁴¹ This doctrine of the two Hermes and their succession is also elaborated in *Panarchia*, liber nonus, *de uno trino principio*, p. 19^f.

⁴² This is a reference to the explanation given by the Suda (see p. 128) and by Ficino (*Pimander*, preface, lines 20–30). The correct interpretation of 'Trismegistus' was proposed by Steuco, *De perenni philosophia*, pp. 55–56.

(whom he calls Chat), Trismegistus's son, flourished fifteen years before Moses' death.⁴³ And so 252 years passed between the murder of Osiris and the time of Tat.

(Fol. 2^v, I col.) Both Hermes wrote books. In his 'sacred book' the Younger relates (through the character of Isis) that his ancestor Mercury, before dying, deposited his books in the sanctuary of Osiris, saying 'Oh sacred books, remain for all time free of putrefaction and corruption' (*Kore Kosmou* 8).

And it is not true, as some have believed,⁴⁴ that the Egyptians had no letters besides hieroglyphics and that they wrote only on columns. They wrote books, which they preserved in their *archana*, and they put inscriptions on columns, which they showed to the people. This can be seen in the same sacred book, in which the character of the Elder Hermes says the following about Osiris and Isis: 'They, Hermes says, will recognize and separate the arcane doctrines from all my other writings and will preserve some of them, whereas those useful to mortal affairs they will carve into columns and obelisks.'⁴⁵ Regarding those arcane doctrines to be preserved in books, the following has been written (*Kore Kosmou* 8):

Oh sacred books of incorruptible things, you have received gifts from me less precious than the medicine of incorruptibility,⁴⁶ viz. remaining for all time imperishable and incorruptible, obscure and secret to whoever might trespass this discipline.

In accord with this is the account given by Orpheus, Solon, Pythagoras, Thales, Democritus, and Plato,⁴⁷ who, having gone to Egypt, of course learned these doctrines not by copying them from obelisks, which were visible to all,⁴⁸ but from priests through conversations, sacred meals, and religious rites ('per colloquia et sobrietatem et sacra').

Proclus says the following about obelisks in the first book of his *Commentary on the Timaeus* (I. 102. 18–22 Diehl):

⁴³ The source of this information is obscure; tracking the diffusion of ancient chronographies in the sixteenth century and later is an extremely difficult task.

⁴⁴ Here Patrizi seems to be hinting at Goropius.

⁴⁵ I have been unable to identify the origin of this quotation.

⁴⁶ Patrizi's text is corrupt. Thus Nock and Festugière accepted Meineke's correction and translated: 'O livres sacrés qui fûtes écrits par mes mains impérissables, vous sur qui, vous ayant oints de la drogue d'immortalité, j'ai tout pouvoir, demeurez, à travers les temps de tout siècle, imputrescible et incorruptibles.'

⁴⁷ Note how the ancient 'chain' of *prisca philosophia* is supplemented and 'historicized'.

⁴⁸ Egyptian obelisks became well known and famous in Europe in the sixteenth century.

Ancient events are present for the Egyptians. They are made fresh thanks to memory, which is established through history. And history is based, in its deeds and its discoveries, on the stele (*columnnae*) on which extraordinary and noteworthy things are described.

And if Iamblichus (see *On the Mysteries* I. 2) says that Pythagoras and Plato learned their philosophy from Mercury's columns, this is no contradiction. From the columns and obelisks they learned the philosophy that would be useful to the people, that is, political and moral philosophy, whereas physics, mathematics, and theology they learned from the priests. Iamblichus says,

For it would not be right for Pythagoras and Plato and Democritus and Eudoxus and many other Hellenes of old to have been granted suitable instruction by the scribes of their time. (*On the Mysteries* I. 1; translation Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell)

And although Iamblichus says at the beginning (*On the Mysteries* I. 1.2) that the Egyptians' ancestors attributed the discoveries of their wisdom to Mercury, putting the name of 'Mercury' on all their writings, these priests spoken of by Iamblichus did not keep their own names hidden. Asclepius the Younger even named his work, the *Asclepius*, after himself, and the most ancient Egyptian astrologers did the same: Anubis, Petosiris, Nechepsus, Horapollon, Maneto. According to Firmicus Maternus, the first two were entrusted by the god Mercury with the secrets of astrology,⁴⁹ while the book entitled *Myriogenesis* was given by Mercury to Aesculapius.⁵⁰ This was later the practice of the Hebrew prophets as well.⁵¹ Although they attributed their prophecies to God, they did not suppress their own names, and their prophetic books were named after them. Those other prophets, the Sibyls, did the same thing.

Nevertheless, Egyptian was a very different language from Greek (a topic also dealt with by Candale),⁵² and it is likely that Egyptian writers and these two Hermes wrote in Egyptian. Why, then, are the Hermetic texts in Greek? Like Candale, Patrizi must account for the text of *CH* XVI. 2, which admonishes against translating Egyptian Hermetic texts into Greek. He finds the explanation in Iamblichus (*On the Mysteries* VIII. 4): 'Those documents [...] which circulate under the name of Hermes contain Hermetic doctrines, even if they often employ the terminology of the philosophers; for they were translated from the Egyptian tongue by men not

⁴⁹ See *Math.* III. 1. 1.

⁵⁰ See *Math.* V. 1. 36.

⁵¹ This is an interesting, albeit brief, reference to the greater antiquity of Egyptian prophets with respect to Hebrew ones.

⁵² See pp. 198–202.

unversed in philosophy' (translation Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell). And it should not seem strange (fol. 3^r, I col.) that the translation of the Hermetic texts from Egyptian to Greek was undertaken in the time of Moses, when Tat the Younger lived. Asclepius was a pupil of this Tat. Moreover, we know from Philo (*The Life of Moses* I. 21–25) that Moses was educated in Greek learning by teachers summoned from Greece at great cost by the Pharaoh's daughter. A little later (*On the Mysteries*. VIII. 5) Iamblichus also says who was responsible for the translation: it was Bithys, on behalf of King Ammon, to whom Asclepius also dedicated his book. It follows that Bithys and Asclepius were contemporaries and lived shortly after Hermes. As for the number of books Hermes wrote, Iamblichus says (*On the Mysteries* VIII. 1) that it was 36,525.

Of all these, only a few have come down to us: the *Poemander* and the *Asclepius*, which was translated into Latin long ago,⁵³ as Vergicius⁵⁴ and Candale realized. But in the view of Patrizi, the *Poemander* translated by Ficino must be divided into fourteen 'chapters', that is, treatises (he was thus the first to divide the *Corpus Hermeticum* into separate treatises). It is not a single work but a collection of *libelli* distinct from the *Poemander* proper, which is merely the first of them. Since the others make no mention of the *Poemander* and neither depend on the first treatise in the order of their doctrines nor display any connections with it, they cannot be called parts of the *Poemander*. This is also shown by the fact that they have different characters, and that some treatises have their own names, such as (II col.) *Clavis*, *Crater*, etc. In addition to the *Poemander* (understood as the whole collection), one must also consider the *excerpta* found in Stobaeus, Cyril of Alexandria, and other writers. These had been found by scholars slowly over the course of the sixteenth century, and we have already encountered them in Steuco's works, which are much richer in Hermetic testimonies than those of Ficino or Lazzarelli.

Patrizi claims to have introduced more than 1040 corrections to the texts of Ficino, Stobaeus, and Candale (which was based on that of Turnebus). This quantity of alternative readings forced him to undertake a new translation, but with a

⁵³ This is also stated in Patrizi's *Discussiones Peripateticae* (p. 252. 23–24), where it is said that the author of the translation entitled *Asclepius* was Apuleius.

⁵⁴ Angelus Vergicius or Vergerius, a scribe from Crete whose handwriting was so fine that it served as the model for the engravers of Greek at the French king's printing works, was the author of the preface to Turnebus's edition. He claims there that Trismegistus lived before Moses (whereas according to many others he was Moses' contemporary), also emphasizing, though, the close relationship between Hermetism and Christianity. Vergicius pointed out to scholars that there were various Hermetic *excerpta* in Stobaeus's *Anthologium*.

different order of *libelli*, such that the succession of the arguments would be more coherent and scientific.⁵⁵ Patrizi's edition certainly deserves to be studied as a chapter in the textual history of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

Patrizi has added to the various Hermetic treatises a short passage of Calcidius relating to Hermes' death. This strange piece of information actually regards the *Altrivodus*, or *Liber Alcidi*, which Eugenio Garin (among others) discussed some fifty years ago⁵⁶ and which we briefly examined above (p. 108).

Patrizi concludes his preface by affirming that Hermes' books present a philosophy that, in its doctrine about God, is extraordinarily consonant with Christian dogma. It will be clear that all Greek philosophies are derived from Hermetic philosophy (and from Chaldaean philosophy, i.e. from the *Chaldaean Oracles*)⁵⁷ and from other books of Hermes that once existed but are now lost. This applies to Pythagoreanism and Platonism, which followed Hermes' ethics and theology, as well as to Aristotelianism and Stoicism, which adopted his physics and first principles of medicine. As for Plato, Patrizi emphasizes his mystical philosophy, which supposedly derived from the most ancient theosophical currents (see *De dialogorum ordine*, p. 48^v).⁵⁸ And elsewhere Patrizi observes: 'Agrapha, et non scripta ea vocans [scl. Aristotle], quae ipse Plato non scribebat, sed voce tradebat tantum, quamvis discipuli ea postea litteris mandarent' (*Plato, et Aristoteles, mystici atque exoterici*, p. 1^r). Thus Patrizi collects the testimonies about Plato's 'non-written doctrines'. In sum, Hermetism is the foundation of Greek philosophy. It would therefore be better or more useful for Christians, and specifically for public schools and those devoted to ecclesiastics (which are too servile to Aristotle), to give thoughtful attention to Hermetic teachings and to those of the schools derived from them, instead of those of Aristotle, which are all stained with an impiety that, in Patrizi's eyes, the Catholic world had apparently not yet grasped.

⁵⁵ This is not the place to examine this succession closely. The various Hermetic books were ordered, as Patrizi himself claims, in line with his own general interpretation of Hermetism.

⁵⁶ Garin, *Studi sul platonismo medievale*, pp. 91–145.

⁵⁷ Thus Patrizi also thinks there was a 'perennis quaedam philosophia' (*Panarchia*, liber decimus septimus, *de creatis mentibus*, p. 38^v).

⁵⁸ Whereas Aristotle, as Patrizi had already argued in his *Discussiones Peripateticae*, constituted a deviation from the most ancient tradition of Greek philosophy.

DISCOVERING THE HERMETIC WRITINGS' TRUE IDENTITY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF ISAAC CASAUBON

In late sixteenth-century Italy and France, the Hermetic tradition continued to stimulate the thought of individuals like Candale and Patrizi. Nevertheless, its authority as the vehicle for a *pia philosophia* that had paved the way for Christian revelation began to be subjected to a series of critiques.

First, Gilbert Genebrard, with the publication of his *Chronographia* in Paris in 1567, dated the Hermetic texts to a period after 303 BC. In his view, this was the point when, as a result of Alexander the Great's conquests, the Greeks began to have more profound contact with Egypt. In the second edition (1580), Genebrard identified certain passages in the *Corpus Hermeticum* that could not possibly have come from an Egyptian writer predating Moses, such as references to the sculptor Phidias (*CH* XVIII. 4) and to divination *per Sibyllam* (*CH* XII. 19). These learned criticisms were taken up in Italy by the Aristotelian Teodoro Angelucci in his polemic against Francesco Patrizi and the *Discussiones Peripateticae*. Patrizi, as we have seen, subordinated Aristotelianism to ancient theosophies and charged it with philosophical ignorance.¹

¹ Fundamental for understanding anti-Hermetic polemics and the replies to them in defence of Hermetism are the articles (both containing earlier bibliography) of Fr. Purnell, Jr ('A Contribution to Renaissance Anti-Hermeticism: The Angelucci–Persio Exchange') and M. Mulsow ('Reaktionärer Hermetismus vor 1600? Zum Kontext der venezianischen Debatte über die Datierung von Hermes Trismegistos') published in *Das Ende des Hermetismus: Historische Kritik und neue Naturphilosophie in der Spätrenaissance. Dokumentation und Analyse der Debatte um die Datierung der hermetischen Schriften von Genebrard bis Casaubon (1567–1614)*, ed. by M. Mulsow (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp. 127–60 and pp. 161–85 respectively.

Francesco Muti then challenged these *calumniae* against Patrizi,² forcing Angelucci to respond. This he did in 1588 with a letter to the philosopher Antonio Persio, now preserved in the Biblioteca Corsiniana in Rome, MS Archivio Linceo 1, cc. 131–38. Transcribed by Martin Mulsow, it was published and analysed in depth by Fr. Purnell;³ it constitutes the longest and most complete attack in the sixteenth century on the authenticity of the Hermetic tradition. The letter contains and succinctly discusses all the points raised in the preceding discussions between Angelucci, Patrizi, and Muti, and it introduces new and important arguments. Angelucci challenges the *communis opinio* about the antiquity of Hermetic philosophy on two grounds: first philologically (based on the observations of his teacher Gilbert Genebrard and of Iohannes Goropius, against whom Patrizi had heatedly argued); second on the plane of Christian truth, which in his view is not only not aided but is even harmed by the Hermetic tradition, invalidated as it is by numerous elements of idolatry. Angelucci adopts this latter (Christian and apologetic) argument from a French source, Mathieu Beroalde, a fervent Calvinist deeply involved in the fierce battles of religion in sixteenth-century France.

But the responsibility for having definitively refuted the Hermetic tradition's authenticity belongs, as is known, to Isaac Casaubon, although one must of course not believe that the great philologist's work immediately silenced the opposition. The enduring tenacity of the belief in the authenticity of Hermetic revelation was certainly due to religious convictions, not philological objectivity. Casaubon's work has been discussed in an important article by Anthony Grafton, who situates the critic's attitude in the context of the culture and religious wars of his time.⁴ Thus Casaubon's condemnation of the Hermetic texts was also motivated by confessional (i.e. anti-Catholic) interests, not scholarly ones, as was the case with Angelucci.⁵

² Francisci Muti Consentini, *Disceptationum libri V contra calumnias Theodori Angelutii* (Ferrariae: Theodori Angelutii, 1588): the text can be found in *Das Ende des Hermetismus*, ed. by Mulsow, pp. 331–49.

³ *Das Ende des Hermetismus*, ed. by Mulsow, pp. 353–66. The transcription (or its printed version, at least), is unfortunately full of errors.

⁴ A. Grafton, 'Protestant versus Prophet: Isaac Casaubon on Hermes Trismegistus', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 46 (1983), 78–93. Grafton uses the 1655 edition of this work.

⁵ For example, Casaubon steadfastly argues against Catholic writers (*Pontificii*) for defending the identification of Dionysius the author of the *Corpus Dionysianum* with the Dionysius the Areopagite spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles (see C. Moerschini, 'L'autenticità del *Corpus Dionysianum*: contestazioni e difese', in *I Padri sotto il torchio*, ed. by M. Cortesi, Le edizioni dell'antichità

Grafton observes that Casaubon began organizing his polemic against the authenticity of Hermetism with marginal annotations in his copy of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. (Casaubon used Turnebus's edition; the copy is now preserved in the British Library.) These annotations in turn served as the basis for an extended treatment of the issue in a work whose polemical intention is announced right on its title page: 'Isaaci Casauboni, *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis*, exercitationes XVI. Ad Cardinalis Baronii Prolegomena in Annales et primam eorum partem [...] cum prolegomenis auctoris in quibus de Baronianis annalibus candidè disputatur, Francofurti [...] 1615.'⁶

The title of the tenth *Exercitatio* (p. 51) is 'Indicatur error Baronii et aliorum, nimium tributum vaticiniis Sibyllarum, Hydaspi, Mercurii Trismegisti et similitum. Falsa illa esse demonstratur, quia mysteria Christiana ante Christum fuerunt abscondita: quae tamen planissime explicantur in libro Mercurij, et Sibyllinis: quia veteres Graeci nihil horum cognorunt [...]. Probatur librum, qui sub nomine Mercurij Trismegisti circumfertur, falsum esse. Scopus fingentium. Vis veritatis. Quis fuerit Mercurius Trismegistus, quando vixerit: quae et quam multa olim illi attributa et inventa et scripta. Graecorum excerpta è libris Hermetis: item versiones [...]'. In testing the authenticity of the Hermetic writings, Casaubon's motivation would seem to be merely that of finding the true faith and remaining faithful to the original message of Christianity. Let us now follow along with Casaubon's discussion, identifying his references to Hermetic and other texts and clarifying them when necessary.

Baronius maintains — Casaubon's critique begins (p. 53, col. I) — that God's plan was to announce the mystery of an event as extraordinary as the incarnation of Christ long beforehand to the Jews and the Gentiles, even though Paul said that the Christian mystery had been hidden since the beginning of the world (Colossians 1. 26; Romans 16. 25; Ephesians 3. 9). Now, how could Paul have spoken the truth if Christian doctrines had been revealed to these peoples (p. 53, col. II) even before Moses? For according to Baronius, there is no doubt at all that Mercury Trismegistus lived before Moses, as long as the evidence about him is true.

cristiana nei secoli XV–XVI (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2002), pp. 189–216). One of these Catholic defenders of Dionysius's identity is Bellarmine, who claims that whoever argues the opposite is either a Lutheran or a *sciolus*. But it is ridiculous, Casaubon notes, for someone like Bellarmine to say this and to want to make judgements about a Greek author, considering that he does not know Greek, as all his works show.

⁶ Casaubon's polemic against Baronius over Trismegistus is easily accessible in the oft-cited *Das Ende des Hermetismus*, ed. by Mulsow, pp. 381–96. Page references are to the 1615 edition.

It is clear that Casaubon, like everyone from Late Antiquity on, saw that certain Hermetic doctrines possessed a superficial similarity with Christianity. It is no coincidence that his refutation is based on the *Poimandres* and *CH* IV and XIII, that is, the very treatises that display the most Christian-like elements. Not even modern scholars deny this affinity. But the medieval and Renaissance tradition interpreted it as an established, given fact stemming from a common derivation. Casaubon, on the other hand, rejected this connection on confessional grounds. Yet he lacked the critical tools of modern historical and religious scholarship, and so he was forced to challenge it in an absolute way, denying the possibility of any true contact between Hermetism and Christianity and instead hypothesizing a forger.

So, the critic continues, this writer, who either is or wants to be called Trimegistus, after speaking *suo more* in his first treatise about the fall of the first humans and the path to salvation subsequently shown to them, does not hesitate to declare that he, too, is revealing to mortals a mystery that until then had remained hidden (*CH* I. 16). Now the fourth treatise speaks of the institution of baptism⁷ and declares that Logos, the Son of God, is of the same nature as the Father, even calling it by the specific term of Christian theology, *homoousios*, ‘consubstantial’ (cf. *CH* I. 10); and others of its doctrines are also found in the New Testament, which supposedly was written long after the Hermetic texts. It is therefore thought to follow that, long before the Law was given to the chosen people by Moses, very many *capita* of evangelical doctrine had already been given to the Egyptians. This is unacceptable.

It is true that Christian writers often quote books that are definitely apocryphal, like the *Oracula Sibyllina*⁸ (p. 54, col. I). In any case, references to pagan writers are without value, seeing as how not even the apostle uses profane sources when discussing the faith.⁹ The same applies to the Sibyls’ prophecies about Christ, or the acrostic of Christ’s name, mentioned by Eusebius, that Cicero supposedly saw and put into his books, or the idea that Virgil knew about the death and passion of Christ.¹⁰ In the last instance we should have to think that the Christian mystery was revealed to an idolatrous pagan before Christ’s coming, even though it remained

⁷ Its title, *Crater*, was interpreted by Christian Hermetism (especially by Foix-Candale) as ‘baptism’.

⁸ The *Oracula Sibyllina* should also be studied with regard to the sixteenth-century notion that they portended Christianity.

⁹ This is said against Christian Hermetists who, beginning with Lactantius, had done the exact opposite.

¹⁰ *Oratio ad sanctorum coetum* 18 for the acrostic of Christ; 19 for Cicero’s statement and for the Greek translation and Christian interpretation of Virgil’s fourth eclogue.

hidden from the Lord's own disciples until a few days before his death,¹¹ and despite their having spent three years with him. Thus Casaubon concludes:

Just as we maintain that many things were put into the songs of the Sibyl to conform with Christian truth, thus we boldly declare and affirm with all our energy that this is a forgery (*pseudepigraphos*), [...] the pure and simple invention of a Christian, or better, of a would-be Christian. We do not by any means doubt that the author intended to demonstrate that many doctrines of the Christian devotion, which at that time were being rejected as new and unheard of, had been known to wise men from time immemorial, and that these had been written down by Mercury himself, who not only the Egyptians but also the Greeks revered on account of his antiquity and reputation for learning. I approve the intention, but I resolutely condemn and detest his project with all my heart. For he offended the truth with his assumption that it required a defence made of lies, that is, the support of the devil. (p. 55, col. I)

In short, 'Shall we be of such little faith as to defend Christian truth by means of pagan evidence?'

Next, the available knowledge about Mercury Trismegistus is evaluated (p. 55, col. II). Evidence about him is provided by Plato in the *Phaedrus* and *Philebus*, by Cicero (in the third book of the *De natura deorum*), and by Diodorus Siculus. These sources were met with before.¹² They say that Mercury explained to the Greeks how to commit their thoughts to writing, and thus they called him *Hermes*, from *hermeneuein* ('to interpret'). Iamblichus, in the first book of *On the Mysteries* and also at the end,¹³ claims that Mercury wrote twenty-five thousand volumes, or else, based on Menestheus,¹⁴ 36,525. Some of Mercury's books were translated by the Greeks, including those called *Salaminiaca*:¹⁵ these might be the ones that Cyril, in his first book against Julian, says were written in Athens and that were called *Jermaicorum*¹⁶ libri XV.¹⁷ Again Cyril, in the second book of the same work, refers to the *Diexodika*,¹⁸ divided into many books, and he mentions one dialogue

¹¹ A reference to Christ's speech to his disciples during the Last Supper.

¹² See above, pp. 263–69.

¹³ That is, in the eighth book. We encountered these passages earlier in the section on Patrizi (p. 269).

¹⁴ Menestheus should be corrected to Manetho.

¹⁵ According to Iamblichus (*On the Mysteries* VIII. 4), their title is *Salmeskiniaka* (i.e. 'astrological ephemerides').

¹⁶ This should be corrected to *Hermaicorum*.

¹⁷ Cf. *Contra Iul.* I. 41; see above, p. 85.

¹⁸ See *Contra Iul.* II. 30–31.

(*sermo*) to Asclepius, and another entitled *Hermes to his Own Mind*.¹⁹ These books are quite similar to those of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, but they had a rather different subject from those that Clement mentions in the sixth of his *Centones*.²⁰ There he says that Mercury wrote many other things, but that his most important books were forty-two in number (p. 70, cols I–II), thirty-six containing Egyptian philosophy and six the art of medicine. Eusebius's *Chronicon* mentions several *Treatises of Hermes on Nature* (*Hermou physika*), which might be the same six books referred to by Clement. Galen, 'in sexto de simplicium medicamentorum facultatibus', also speaks of several books on medicine and healing by Mercury the Egyptian. We learn furthermore from Galen that imposters made use of Mercury's name. Plutarch, for his part, has little regard for Mercury's books, as can be seen in the *De Iside et Osiride*.²¹ There were alchemical books attributed to him which explained how to make gold. Astronomers, moreover, remember Mercury as one of their own, and even today one can find books of astronomy attributed to him. That age was rife with forgeries, and so it should be no wonder if an author (who was only superficially acquainted with Christianity) attempted to create a theological fake of his own. If anything is startling, it is that these writings were accepted by the Fathers and quoted, as if they were authentic works of Mercury or Thoth the Egyptian, by Justin,²² Augustine, and Lactantius.

It is thus necessary for Casaubon to demonstrate that the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which at the time enjoyed the highest reputation, is a forgery and a pure and simple fabrication (*plasma*). This he does through an examination of its content and style.

Regarding content, Casaubon argues that the *Corpus Hermeticum* does not contain Mercury's true Egyptian doctrines, but rather Greek doctrines taken from the books of Plato and the Platonists, imported wholesale with their own technical terms, accompanied by Christian doctrines taken from scripture. The nature of Egyptian philosophy can be gathered from Eusebius's *Praeparatio Evangelica* and from a very important passage from the eighth book of Origen's *Contra Celsum*.²³ Pseudo-Mercury's philosophical terminology, on the contrary, comes from Platonism and scripture. Casaubon's judgement is not only correct but also absolutely

¹⁹ This work cannot be readily identified.

²⁰ I.e. Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* (VI. 4. 35–37).

²¹ *De Iside et Osiride* 61. 375F.

²² Casaubon is referring to the writer now considered to be pseudo-Justin, author of the *Cohortatio ad Graecos* (see below, note 27).

²³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* VIII. 58.

novel with respect to its first claim, viz. that the *Corpus Hermeticum* is pervaded by Platonism. Until the sixteenth century the opposite was held to be the case, namely that Plato had taken his doctrines from Hermes the Egyptian. Regarding the identification of Christian doctrines in the Hermetic writings, it has already been noted above that certain Christian doctrines seemed akin to Hermetic ones (see pp. 11–25).

This emerges in detail, Casaubon continues, from an examination of the first treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (p. 57). Mercury reports what Poemander had taught him about the nature of things and the creation of the world. The meaning of the name Poemander is equivalent to that of 'shepherd', the forger utilizing Christ's concept of 'Shepherd' as reported in John 10. 11 ('I am the good Shepherd'). The following passage from *CHI*. 6 also comes from the Gospel:

I am mind, your god, who existed before the watery nature that appeared out of darkness.
The lightgiving Logos who comes from Mind is the Son of God.

Christ is light, as is said in John 8. 12 and 1. 4, 5, 8, and 9. When Poemander says that he is the light that existed before the waters were separated from the darkness (*CHI*. 6), he seems to be referring to John 1. 5, 'And the light shineth in the darkness', but the meaning is different. For the Hermetic writer refers to passages which affirm the eternity of the Son of God, who existed before the foundations of the world were laid: 'An ille cascus Aegyptius Mose antiquior notum habuit Verbum Dei Filium?' The phrase 'Logos, Son of God' is certainly Christian, whereas Poemander uses a Platonic doctrine when saying that he proceeds from the mind of God. The doctrine of Mind, that is, of the Logos of God, is common in Greek philosophy, as can be seen in Anaxagoras,²⁴ Aristotle, and others.

Then Casaubon considers the meaning of *authentias nous*, which appears at the beginning of the *Poemandres* (and which Ficino and Candale had discussed earlier). In Casaubon's view, in speaking of *authentias nous* the Hermetic writer follows the model of the *Timaeus*, which says that Mind, that is, God, is *autokrator*, omnipotent. Actually, the reference Casaubon thinks he has identified is quite generic. The *Timaeus* contains something that is only somewhat similar, where it speaks of the creation of the world by the idea-contemplating demiurge. If anything, it is later Platonism that provides the closest model for the Hermetic doctrine. *Authentia* ('hoc est, suprema potestas') is located above mind, as the Platonists Dionysius²⁵

²⁴ Which Casaubon probably knew from his reading of Plato's *Phaedo* (97c).

²⁵ Whom Casaubon thus believed, in contrast to Catholic scholars, was not the same as the Dionysius the Areopagite mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles.

and Synesius²⁶ say. These are all obscure (*ainigmata*) expressions used by Christians with a bent for Platonism. When Poemander declares that he is Mind and that he came from Mind, he obscurely hints at the Father and Son's identity of essence. A little later it is said: 'The Logos of God leapt straight up to the pure craftwork of nature and united with the craftsman-Nous (for the Logos was of the same substance (*homoousios*))' (CH I. 10). This passage shows that the forger was acquainted with the mysteries of Christian doctrine. If, conversely, the Fathers had read these words and used them as a source for their own doctrines (assuming they came after most-ancient Hermes), then they would seem to have gone about it rather sloppily, not realizing that such could only have been written by a Christian or, at the least, a person familiar with Christian works. First of all, the word *homoousios* is strange for that age. For since Justin mentions Mercury at the end of his *Cohortatio ad Graecos*²⁷ and quotes a few passages from the *Poemander*, it follows that the author of the Hermetic text lived not long after the apostles. But we cannot find one Christian author of the same age, that is, of Justin's time, who used the word *homoousios* for the divine Persons. Athanasius, in order to demonstrate that it was known and used by the Fathers before Nicea, reports in his *Letter to the Africans* that it was employed by the two Dionysii.²⁸ Equally worthy of note for their Christian connotation are the words 'Logos, Lord' and 'Nous, God, Father' in CH I. 6.

An obvious and banal imitation of the visions of the prophets can also be discerned in CH I. 4, where the author presents an image of the creation of the world: Poemander changes his shape and Mercury is filled with light. The first treatise continues with a cosmogonical account: a sinister, coiling darkness arose, which then changed into a watery nature. Now the image of a darkness preceding the creation of the world comes from Genesis. The text continues: 'Earth and water stayed behind, mixed with one another, so that earth could not be distinguished from water, but they were stirred to hear by the spiritual word that moved upon them' (CH I. 5). This is an imitation of Moses, who says that the Spirit of God moved above the waters. The verb 'to move' (*epipheresthai*) is also taken from Holy Scripture (Genesis 1. 2). (p. 58) There is a similar borrowing from scripture in

²⁶ In his *Hymns*, Synesius follows the Neoplatonic scheme of the One located above *Nous* or Mind.

²⁷ Mentioned in note 22; cf. pseudo-Justin, *Cohortatio ad Graecos* 38.

²⁸ PG, 26, col. 1040BC. Let us once again note Casaubon's shrewdness: here he identifies the two historical figures (Dionysius of Rome and Dionysius of Alexandria) referred to in Athanasius's letter despite the fact that they are not explicitly named — and Athanasius's letter was not well known.

another Hermetic treatise: 'In the deep there was boundless darkness and [...] chaos' (*CH* III. 1). Here Causaubon proposes two corrections. The first was accepted by Nock-Festugière: 'phoberon te kai stygnon skolios espeiramenon' instead of 'skolios pepeiramenon'. The second was also accepted by Nock-Festugière, although they attribute it to Foix-Candale: 'phesin, eme palin eche noi soi' instead of 'phesin emoi palin: eche toi soi hosa theleis mathein' (translated by Causaubon as 'concepe animo et serva quaecumque vis discere').

A little later, the first treatise says (p. 59): 'In your mind you have seen the archetypal form, the preprinciple that exists before a beginning without end' (*CH* I. 8). Here we find the Platonic doctrine of the ideas that pre-existed in the Mind of God. The words 'God, being androgyne' (*CH* I. 9), come from Valentinus's Aeons, which are mentioned by Epiphanius.²⁹ They recall Platonist speculation, and they are even used by Synesius of Cyrene in his third *Hymn*.³⁰ A bit later (*CH* I. 16), however, when the same words are applied to mankind, they evoke the androgyny spoken of in Plato's *Symposium*. The account of the creation of animals and man (*CH* I. 11) comes from the Bible.

The story of the fall of man is full of Platonic foolishness and is not worth explaining. Man, Poemander says, was made twofold, mortal and immortal (*CH* I. 15 and 17). This was the mystery that until then had remained hidden, as the forger says, thus imitating the words of the apostle (Colossians 1. 26; Romans 16. 25). Here Causaubon proposes another correction, it, too, accepted by Nock-Festugière: instead of 'ta thneta paschei hypokeimena', he proposes 'scribe *hypokeimēnos*'; but Ficino, he adds, reads the whole sentence differently.³¹

(p. 60) The forger's words, 'But god immediately spoke a holy speech: Increase in increasing and multiply in multitude, all you creatures and craftworks' (*CH* I. 18), actually come from a famous passage of Genesis (1. 28).³² Further evidence of this imitation in the Hermetic author's account of the world's creation is

²⁹ *Panarion* 31. 5. 3, 31. 5. 7, etc.

³⁰ Now numbered as *Hymn* I, v. 186.

³¹ Namely: 'immortalis enim est, cunctorumque arbitrium obtinet: caetera vero vivencia, quae mortalia sunt, fato subiecta, patiuntur' (p. 1838 beginning in the Basel edition of Ficino). That is, the subject is 'mortal things', which are subject to fate, not man (and thus, as was seen above, Ficino reads: *ta thneta paschei hypokeimena*).

³² Indeed, they are frequently adduced by Christian Hermetists to demonstrate Hermes' antiquity.

provided by Cyril, *Contra Iulianum* II, who quotes from the *Diexodika*, first speech of Mercury Trismegistus.³³

Then the Hermetic text explains how man can make up for the sin of the fall (*CH* I. 19): let the sensible man recognize himself and distance himself from the error of love. In this passage those who do not achieve salvation are referred to as 'abiding in darkness', a phrase found in John 12. 46. And, having read John 14. 6 ('I am the way, the truth, and the life'), the forger mixes this phrase of Christ into his foolishness (*CH* I. 21). When Poemander says that he keeps his distance from evil men and gives way to the avenging demon (*CH* I. 23), he is in harmony with the Platonist Synesius, according to whom cruel powers oversee the punishment of the wicked at the will of divine Providence (*epist.* 56).³⁴ (p. 61) Death is called 'the way up', a description familiar to Platonists.³⁵ And thus Poemander says (*CH* I. 26) that those who lived justly ascend to the Father after death and are placed by him among the *dynameis*, a term used by scripture to denote the *virtues* spoken of by Paul in Romans 8. 38. 'Apud Dionysium, quem vocant *Areopagitam*' ('In Dionysius, whom they call the *Areopagite*'),³⁶ the verb *theothenai* is frequently used to refer to reverent men who 'have become gods', as Poemander also says. Other examples follow of words that are found in scripture and in *CH* I, like *keryssein*, or in the works of the Neoplatonists, like *syn theoi* ('god willing'), which is used by Dionysius and others.

CH I's final hymn in honour of God contains liturgical phrases familiar from scripture (such as *Trishagion*, which comes from Isaiah 6. 3) and ancient liturgies. Chap. 31 contains the phrase *dexai logikas thysias* ('accept my pure speech offerings'), as does the hymn in treatise XIII, where the imitation of David's Psalms is obvious: it comes from Romans 12. 1; in *CH* XIII. 21 the phrase 'send an acceptable sacrifice to God' comes from Philipians 4. 18.

CH IV is entitled *Crater*. The *Crater*, according to the standard interpretation of Casaubon's time, is the baptismal font, and the mind sent to earth from heaven in baptism is the Holy Spirit, which, as the Greek Fathers explain, enters into the water of the sacrament. The words of *CH* IV. 6, 'Unless you first hate your body,

³³ *Contra Iul.* II. 30–31. Cyril, however, following his own interpretation of ancient Christianity, had said that Mercury Trismegistus is in agreement with Genesis.

³⁴ As a matter of fact, the Hermetic and Christian doctrines of reward and salvation do indeed have much in common, as was seen above, pp. 16–26.

³⁵ Since it permits the 'ascent' of the soul to the heavenly spheres.

³⁶ Here, too, Casaubon distances himself from the opinion of Catholics, as was said above, note 25.

my child, you cannot love yourself, come from John 12. 25. Ignorance of this is only possible for those who 'for fear of committing a sin of heresy refuse to read the Holy Scripture. Such, indeed, is the life in certain places'³⁷ — that is, in Catholic lands.

Thereupon follows a list of other points of contact between the Hermetic writings, on the one hand, and scripture or Platonist texts, on the other. Baptism is several times called *palingenesia* in *CH* XIII, as in Titus 3. 5. A phrase from *Mercury's Letter to Tat* (frag. 1 Nock-Festugière) — 'Thinking God is difficult, but speaking about him is impossible even for those able to think him' — is used by Justin in *Paraeneticus*³⁸ (which contains the error *Akmonos* for *Ammonos*) and by Cyril in the *Contra Iulianum*;³⁹ it is taken from the *Timaeus*.⁴⁰ Platonist doctrine is also the source for the question posed at the beginning of treatise XII, viz. whether God possesses substance or essence (*ousia*). Origen had already discussed it (he is rather interestingly characterized as 'philosophus Platonicus saepe magis quam Theologus') in the *Contra Celsum*,⁴¹ (p. 63) as had Dionysius, 'ut vocant, Areopagita', in the *De divinis nominibus*.

Thereupon follow several considerations that lack true demonstrative rigour (pp. 63–64). A doctrine exists that is shared by many Greek philosophers, and the way Mercury the Egyptian discusses it shows that he was a philosopher expert in Greek learning, not the Egyptian mysteries. According to this doctrine, created things never truly perish but only change their form, since death is nothing other than regeneration. This doctrine can be found in Hippocrates, Aristotle, Apollonius of Tyana, Seneca, and others.

Casaubon then goes on (p. 64 end) to consider the *elocutio* and certain *historiae* of the Hermetic writings. (p. 65) Since Mercury the Egyptian lived about two thousand years after the creation of the world, it cannot be his book that mentions Phidias (*CH* XVIII. 4) and the citharist Eunomus of Locri (*CH* XVIII. 6). This Eunomus was crowned victor against Ariston of Reggio at the Pythian games, games that were instituted long after Mercury lived (however the passage about Eunomus had been considered spurious since Turnebus).⁴²

³⁷ 'metu Haereseos à Scripturae lectione abhorrent. Sic enim hodie quibusdam in locis vivitur'.

³⁸ I.e. in the oft-mentioned *Cohortatio ad Graecos*.

³⁹ *Contra Iul.* I. 42.

⁴⁰ *Tim.* 28c, a correct observation on Casaubon's part.

⁴¹ *Contra Celsum* VII. 38 and 45.

⁴² On these incongruities in the Hermetic text, already discovered by Genebrard, see Grafton, 'Protestant versus Prophet', pp. 84–85.

Furthermore, Mercury supposedly either wrote in Greek himself or was translated by someone else from Egyptian (an issue fully treated by Candale). Both options are impossible. For the Greek spoken in Hermes' time had many words, phrases, and even a whole mode of *elocutio* that were utterly different from the later form of the language. The Hermetic treatises bear no evidence of this antiquity, such as can be found in Plato, not to mention in Hippocrates, Herodotus, and other older authors. On the contrary, they even employ Greek words that were not yet in use when the Lord was born. A few examples of this late Greek language are *authentia* (which means *potestas*), *archontike*, *prophaneia*,⁴³ *hylotes*, and *ousiotes*. These words are not translations of Egyptian terms into Greek but rather genuine Greek neologisms — and late ones at that.

As for the possibility of translation,⁴⁴ 'no translation has ever been crafted so well as to bear no trace of a certain *peregrinitas*'. But this is not the case with the Hermetic texts: everything is perfectly *graece* and corresponds to late Hellenism. Examples are the etymologies provided of *athanatos*, at the beginning of treatise XIII, of *basileus* (*CH* XVIII. 16), and of *kosmos* (IX. 8), which are certainly not Egyptian words. Further examples are provided by frequent allusions to Greek culture, such as the practice of suppliants taking refuge with the statues of gods, which was in use among the Greeks and the Romans, prophecies from oak trees (*dia dryos*),⁴⁵ and the words *prytanis*, *prytaneuesthai*, *brabeia*, *tropai*, and *kallinikos*, which are known only to those familiar with Greek civilization. Moreover, the very first sentence of the first treatise is an imitation of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.⁴⁶

⁴³ A term judged *dithyrambica* by Casaubon.

⁴⁴ This had been hypothesized by Ficino, who says in the preface to his translation: 'Edidit uero librum aegyptiis litteris idemque graecae linguae peritus: graecis inde trasferendo communicauit aegyptiorum mysteria' ('He issued his book in Egyptian and, being an expert in Greek, translated it into that language and thus made Egyptian mysteries known to the Greeks').

⁴⁵ The Greek text of *CH* XII. 19 (*dia dryos*), which should have been translated *per sylvam*, had been corrupted by the 1471 incunable and by many sixteenth-century translations to *per Sibyllam* — this had been identified as an error by Genebrard. Thus Casaubon shows that he, too, was aware of the necessity of correcting it. On this philological problem, see Fr. Purnell, Jr, 'Hermes and the Sibyl: A Note on Ficino's *Pimander*', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 30 (1977), 305–10; Grafton, 'Protestant versus Prophet', p. 86. A different approach is taken by M. J. B. Allen, 'The Sibyl in Ficino's Oaktree', *Modern Language Notes*, 95 (1980), 205–10, repr. in *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in Marsilio Ficino's Metaphysics and its Sources* (Ashgate: Variorum, 1995).

⁴⁶ Not a very convincing claim, we might note.

In conclusion, the claim put forward by the imposter in the letter to Ammon,⁴⁷ viz. that these treatises were written in Egyptian and then translated into Greek, is false. Utterly false is the belief, which reigned until now, that the treatises were written by Hermes Trismegistus, the most ancient Egyptian wise man, or that they were translated later.

Casaubon's arguments show that what Grafton emphasized is indeed true: religious considerations and the defence of orthodox Christianity were the essential motives behind his conviction that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a forgery of the Christian era, and more specifically of a later period of ancient Christianity. But it is also important that Casaubon demonstrated his thesis not on the basis of confessional assumptions — as had a scholar as noteworthy as Baronius — but rather with the aid of philological tools, which he applied to both Christian and pagan texts. This method took an enormous step forward with Casaubon's tenth *exercitatio*, *De rebus sacris et ecclesiasticis*. His work also reveals a much more profound knowledge of Christian and pagan literature than is to be found in that of Angelucci and his opponents thirty years earlier. The truth inevitably marched forward, albeit slowly, despite tendentious efforts to hinder it.

⁴⁷ I.e. the so-called *Definitiones Asclepii*, treatise XVI (chaps 1–2) of the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

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INDEX OF ANCIENT AUTHORS

- Abaelardus, Petrus, 93–5, 104, 106, 109, 114
Acta, 19–20, 96, 198–9, 206, 213, 224
Acta Thomae, 20
 Aelius Aristides, 37
 Alanus ab Insulis, 95, 101, 102–7, 111–12
 Albertus Magnus, 91, 111, 113–14
 Albinus, 29
 Albumazar, 117
 Alexander Halensis, 112, 115
 Alexander Neckam, 110–11
 Ambrosius, 31
 Ammianus Marcellinus, 69
 Angelucci, Teodoro, 273–4, 285
Anonymi Monophysitae Theosophia, 89, 127–8
 Anselmus, 119
 Antiochus Ascalonius, 166
 Apocalypse, 40, 175
 Apollonius Tyanensis, 283
 Apuleius, 2, 19, 28, 30, 31, 49, 50, 52, 59–61, 76, 101, 116, 119, 124, 136, 140, 176, 202–4, 209, 256
 Aquinas, Thomas, 112, 126
 Aristoteles, 106, 116–17, 120, 126, 256, 271, 279, 283
 Arnobius, 31, 32, 264
 Athanasius, 280
 Athenagoras, 29, 63, 82
 Augustinus, 2, 4, 25, 30, 33, 34, 49, 50, 51, 65, 73–82, 92–5, 97, 98, 104, 106, 109, 110, 114, 116, 117, 121, 125–6, 136, 142–3, 145–6, 150, 203–4, 265, 278
 Ausonius, 62
 Avicenna, 117
 Avienus, 62, 68
 Bacon, Roger, 91, 115–17
 Baronius, Caesar, 275, 285
 Benci, Tommaso, 108, 186
 Benvenuto da Imola, 185
 Bernardus Silvestris, 97–102
 Beroalde, Mathieu, 274
 Berthold of Moosburg, 91, 112
 Bertoldi da Serravalle, Giovanni, 185
 Boethius, 72, 95, 173
 Bonaventura, 112, 113
 Bradwardine, Thomas, 91, 113, 115, 118–21, 125
 Cariteo, 172
 Casaubon, Isaac, 201, 215, 253, 273–85
 Chalcidius, 138, 271
 Cicero, 28, 33, 34, 41, 42, 53, 66, 69, 108, 117, 136, 205–6, 249, 264–5, 276–7
 Claudianus, 62, 63
 Clemens Alexandrinus, 264, 278
 Clemens Romanus, 193
 Cusanus, Nicolaus, 113, 121–4
 Cyprianus, 30, 31
 Cyrillus Alexandrinus, 3, 4, 12, 18, 38, 84–9, 145, 202, 248, 258, 270, 277, 282–3
 Dante Alighieri, 185
 Democritus, 261

- Didymus, 37
 Diodorus Siculus, 1, 263–7, 277
 Diogenes Laertius, 28, 254
 Dionysius Aeropagita, 121, 139, 144, 176, 179, 260, 274, 278–9, 282–3
 Eckhart, 112, 113
 Empedocles, 30, 41
 Epicurus, 263
 Epiphanius, 37, 281
 Eusebius Caesariensis, 83, 84, 153, 187, 263, 278
 Exodus, 162, 218
 Ficino, Marsilio, 2, 47, 48, 106–8, 117, 121, 127, 133–59, 181–3, 186, 190, 194–5, 197–8, 202, 204, 245, 253, 270, 279
 Firmicus Maternus, 28, 38, 61, 67, 68, 269
 Foix-Candale, François, 87, 128, 189–244, 269–70, 273, 276, 279, 281
 Francesco de' Nerli, 118
 Funk, John, 204
 Galenus, 278
 Genebrard, Gilbert, 197, 273–4, 283–4
 Genesis, 37, 68, 87, 95, 157, 174, 176, 178, 181, 206, 233, 238, 248–50, 252, 258, 280–1
 Georgius Pachymeres, 131
 Giovanni Dominici, 125–6
Glosae super Trismegistum, 106–7, 110
 Goropius, Iohannes, 264–5, 268, 274
 Gregorius Nazianzenus, 37, 84, 130, 131
 Grosseteste, Robertus, 117
 Hermannus Carinthiensis, 97, 98
 Herodotus, 284
 Hesiodus, 28, 84, 169
 Hieronymus, 30–1
 Hilarius Pictaviensis, 93
 Hippocrates, 283–4
 Hippolytus, 83, 156
 Homer, 28, 84, 256
Hymni Orphici, 177
 Iamblichus, 24, 37, 42, 65, 149–50, 251, 262, 269–70, 277
 Iohannes Chrysostomus, 215
 Iohannes Evangelista, 17, 20, 40, 47, 89, 155, 165, 167, 175, 178, 191, 199, 208–9, 212, 214–16, 218–19, 223, 233, 235, 241, 244, 279, 282–3
 Iohannes Lydus, 25, 26, 43, 53, 62
 Iohannes Malalas, 37
 Iohannes Sarisberiensis, 94
 Irenaeus, 19, 20, 215, 219, 232
 Isaías, 282
 Iulianus, 277
 Iustinus, 278, 280, 283
 I Kings, 218
 Lactantius, 2, 4, 16, 18, 28, 31–51, 53, 58, 66, 68, 73, 74, 77, 79, 81–6, 92, 93, 95, 98, 104–5, 107, 117, 122, 124, 126, 134, 136, 143–6, 166, 183, 186, 205, 247, 264, 278
 Landino, Cristoforo, 185–6
 Lazzarelli, Lodovico, 152, 160–85, 198, 209, 245, 253, 270
 Lefèvre d'Étaples, Jacques, 174, 182–3
 Leucippus, 263
Liber Alcidi, 107–9
Liber de sex rerum principiis, 92, 109, 120,
Liber viginti quattuor philosophorum, 92, 109–15, 117, 118–20, 126
 Lorenzo di Domenico, 187
 Luca, 61, 211
 Lucanus, 67, 68, 138
 Lucretius, 53
 Macrobius, 62, 72, 97, 110, 171
 Maimonides, Moses, 171, 183–4
 Malachias, 241
 Maneto, 277
 Manetti, Giannozzo, 174
 Manilius, 53, 68
 Marcellus Ancyranus, 53, 83
 Marcus Cicero, 249
 Marcus Evangelista, 61, 80, 216, 249
 Marius Victorinus, 49, 110
 Martianus Capella, 62, 72
 Martin, Raymond, 184
 Marullus, 185
 Matthaëus, 40, 77, 80, 235
 Maximus Confessor, 130
 Maximus Tyrius, 65
 Minucius, Felix, 30, 67

- Moses ben Shem Tov de León, 183
 Moses ha-Darshan, 183–4
 Musaeus, 28
 Muti, Francesco, 274
 Numbers, 198
 Numenius, 13, 153
Oracula Chaldaica, 111, 130, 142, 246–7, 257, 259
Oracula Sibyllina, 276
 Origenes, 20, 83, 278, 283
 Orpheus, 28, 30, 74, 75, 84, 86, 140–1, 143, 147, 154, 245, 262–3, 265
 Ovidius, 53, 252
Panegyrici Latini, 31, 62
Passio S. Caeciliae, 20
 Patrizi, Francesco, 108, 117, 128, 156, 158, 191, 197, 248, 252–66, 268–71, 273–4, 277
 Paulus, 19, 21, 77, 121, 155, 176, 200, 209–10, 218, 220, 222, 232, 235, 275, 281–3
 Persio, Antonio, 274
 Petrus apostolus, 20, 192, 208
 Petrus Lombardus, 111, 114
 Pherecydes, 28
 Philastrius, 49
 Philo, 20, 176, 179, 247, 257, 270
 Philo Byblius, 251
 Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni, 68, 178
 Photius, 128
 Plato, 12, 25, 26, 28, 29, 32, 34, 35, 40, 47, 61, 66, 83–5, 88, 92–4, 106, 108, 112, 114, 117, 136–9, 141, 150, 152–4, 176, 179, 183, 201, 214, 218, 221, 247, 249, 256–7, 271, 277–9, 281, 283–4
 Plautus, 101
 Pletho, 141–2
 Plotinus, 50, 88, 126, 146, 151–2, 154, 254
 Plutarchus, 1, 63, 278
 Pontano, Giovanni, 169–73, 175
 Porphyrius, 20, 25, 38, 48, 50, 65, 86–7, 89, 179
 Prateolus, Gabriel, 194
 Proclus, 66, 112, 141–2, 146, 152, 268
 Proverbs, 84, 94, 175
 Psalms, 89, 192, 221, 241, 252, 282
 Psellos, Michael, 2, 128–31
 Pseudo-Anthymus, 53, 84
 Pseudo-Aristoteles, 140, 256
 Pythagoras, 28, 29, 32, 34, 85, 126, 141–3, 175, 263, 268–9
 Quodvultdeus, 79–82, 92–5, 104–5, 107, 109, 119, 249
 Richard of Saint Victor, 108
 Rosselli, Annibale, 194
 Rufinus, 193
 Sallustius, 42
 Salutati, Coluccio, 125
 Scaligero, Josephus, 194
 Seneca, 74, 283
 Servius, 67, 101
 Steuco, Agostino, 174, 180, 245–52
 Stobaeus, 2, 3, 8, 30, 53, 83, 180, 190, 197, 262, 266, 270
 Strabo, 1
 Suda, 2, 127, 190–1, 248, 267
 Symmachus, 31, 72
 Synesius, 37, 280–2
 Tertullianus, 2, 4, 28–30, 35, 48, 67
 Teodoricus Carnotensis, 95–8, 122, 123
 Thomas of York, 118
 Thucydides, 129
 Tiberianus, 60, 61, 67
 Turnebus, Adrianus, 2, 158, 197, 202, 275, 283
 Valerius Soranus, 60
 Varro, 33, 78
 Vergicius, 270
 Vergilius, 53, 60, 67, 68, 74, 95, 97, 138, 140, 155, 252, 256, 261, 276
 Vincentius Bellovacensis, 126
 William of Auvergne, 114, 115
 Xenophon, 108, 284
 Zosimus, 4, 18

INDEX OF MODERN AUTHORS

- Agozzino, T., 60, 62
Albek, H. Ch., 184
Allen, M. J. B., 138–42, 148–50, 152, 284
Amann, J., 37
Arfè, P., 121, 124

Backus, I., 193
Bartolucci, G., 187
Beatrice, P. F., 89
Beaujeu, J., 101
Berti, E., 160
Bianchi, U., 58
Bousset, W., 14, 56, 69
Brand, S., 39
Braun, R., 35, 79, 80
Brini, M., 171–2
Buccolini, C., 148
Büchli, J., 11, 17, 69

Campanelli, M., 158
Camplani, A., 5, 22
Carcopino, J., 32, 50
Carozzi, P. A., 52, 58
Casadio, G., 25, 63
Castelli, P., 253
Chomarat, J., 185
Copenhaver, B., 1, 9, 22, 133–5, 146–7, 151–2, 155
Crahay, R., 171
Cumont, F., 59

De Palma Digeser, E., 32, 48
Delp, M. D., 109

Derchain, Ph., 51, 63
Dodd, C. H., 5
Dodds, E. R., 8
Dörrie, H., 8
Duffy, J. M., 130

Euler, W. A., 144

Faivre, A., 189, 202, 214
Fera, V., 172
Ferguson, A. S., 46
Festugière, A.-J., 1, 4, 6, 8, 10–12, 18, 20, 24, 27, 29, 32, 57, 59, 62, 64–9, 82–4, 88, 118, 128–31, 136, 156–9, 173, 196–7, 202, 256, 268, 281
Filoramo, G., 8, 10, 14
Fowden, G., 4, 7, 9, 14, 27, 29, 32, 43, 50, 60, 75, 77, 82, 83, 86, 131
Fredouille, J.-Cl., 28
Freudenberger, Th., 249

Garin, E., 8, 108, 118, 121, 125, 126, 148, 271
Gautier, P., 130, 131
Gentile, S., 133, 134, 135, 136, 138, 141, 142, 156
Gersh, S., 45, 64, 65
Glorieux, P., 102, 103
Gonzalez Blanco, A., 9
Grafton, A., 274–5, 283–5
Gregory, T., 95, 96
Grese, W. C., 21
Gruenwald, I., 185

- Hanegraaff, W., 151, 178, 180–2, 214
 Harrie, J., 189, 209, 214
 Heck, E., 36, 39, 46
 Horsfall Scotti, M. T., 52, 57
 Hudry, F., 110
 Huninck, V., 50, 52

 Idel, M., 144
 Ingreteau, Ch., 34
 Iversen, E., 7, 40

 Klibansky, R., 92
 Kodera, S., 153
 Kristeller, P. O., 133–4, 169, 173, 177–8, 180
 Kroll, W., 1, 11, 14, 64

 Lelli, F., 179
 Lenaz, L., 62
 Loi, V., 35
 Löw, A., 27, 29, 32, 35, 36, 39, 41, 42, 44–6
 Lucentini, P., 71, 72, 91, 92, 95, 97, 98, 102–4,
 106, 108, 110, 112, 114, 135, 185
 Mahé, J.-P., 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9–11, 22, 25–7, 37, 43,
 50–2, 56–60, 65, 66, 70, 77, 156
 Marcel, R., 135, 153
 Monat, P., 39
 Montserrat-Torrens, J., 83
 Moreschini, C., 3, 17, 24, 27, 37, 45, 56, 62, 67,
 68, 77, 130, 171–2, 174, 185, 203, 257, 274
 Muccillo, M., 194, 245, 253, 264
 Mulsow, M., 273–4

 Nock, A. D., 1, 4, 8, 12, 18, 24, 35, 39, 68, 69,
 81, 83, 88, 128, 136, 156, 159, 196–7, 202,
 256, 268, 281
 Norden, E., 67, 213

 Pearson, B. A., 5
 Pease, A. S., 33
 Pellegrino, M., 42
 Pepin, J., 84
 Perrin, M., 41, 42
 Perrone Compagni, V., 92
 Peste, J., 17, 19, 21, 22
 Philonenko, M., 5
 Porreca, D., 102
 Pricoco, S., 36

 Puech, H. Ch., 156
 Purnell, Fr., Jr, 273–4, 284

 Quispel, G., 14, 16, 17, 20, 25, 26, 30

 Regen, F., 92
 Reitzenstein, R., 1, 3, 5, 19–21, 51, 57–9, 62,
 67, 70, 128, 129, 158
 Rochette, B., 51, 53, 65

 Saci, M. P., 160–1, 170–1
 Salaman, C., 145
 Sannino, A., 91, 92, 115
 Scarpi, P., 215
 Scholem, G., 185
 Scott, W., 1, 18, 24, 25, 40, 44, 45, 56, 58, 64,
 65, 82, 158
 Sfameni Gasparro, G., 14, 15, 17, 21, 24, 27, 28,
 35, 38, 42, 58, 67
 Siniscalco, P., 32, 45, 81
 Skutsch, F., 67
 Sosti, S., 170–2
 Soubiran, J., 62
 Stausberg, M., 253
 Sturlese, L., 91, 112, 113

 Tambrun, B., 133
 Tarabochia Canavero, O., 140
 Thomas, P., 3
 Thurner, M., 124
 Toussaint, St., 135, 144, 151
 Tröger, K.-W., 21, 22

 Van den Broek, R., 16, 22
 Vansteenbergh, E., 121
 Vasoli, C., 144, 155, 253

 Walker, D. P., 151
 Walter, J., 32, 48,
 Waszink, J. H., 29,
 Weill-Parot, N., 151
 Wendland, P., 67
 West, M., 62
 Westerink, L. G., 130
 Wetherbee, W., 98, 99
 Whittaker, J., 38
 Wigtil, D. N., 57
 Wlosok, A., 17, 18, 32, 35, 36, 41, 42, 46, 59, 70,
 71

Woodhouse, C. M., 141, 142

Woolsey, R. B., 98

Yates, Fr., 146

Zambelli, P., 147, 150–1

Zepf, M., 62, 64

Zielinski, Th., 56

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